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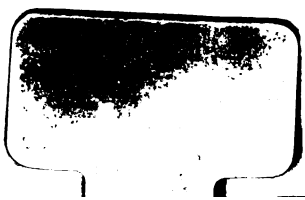

MARGARET'S ENGAGEMENT.

A Novel.

'I shall be tutored to say "Yes" in time,—
The scarecrow, Sir, was married to the maypole
In time,—but, bless me! 'twas a tedious courtship!'

H. TAYLOR.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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MARGARET'S ENGAGEMENT.

CHAPTER I.

WHAT IS HE WORTH?

Rich? Ask'st thou if he's rich? Observe me, sir;
His money-bags are torpid, he's so rich!

BARRY CORNWALL.

WHAT is Mr. Morton of Fenchurch Street worth? (the great ship-owner and insurance broker, you know.) He is said on 'Change to be worth a million. It cannot be much less, they say, for, besides the regular profits of a lucrative and long-established business, he has embarked in all the most thriving speculations of the day, with almost invariable success. And if Mr. Morton

is believed to be 'worth' a 'million of money,' you need scarcely be told, that he is further worth the deference and respect of all, or nearly all, the magnates of dock, warehouse, and bank. In a social point of view he was not 'worth' much to his acquaintance, for he led a quiet retired life, in his gloomy old-fashioned house in Queen Square; but this retirement was forgiven him on the plea of the ill-health which (as some people oddly phrase it) he 'enjoyed.' Really, if any man could be said to derive positive enjoyment from ill-health, 'Morton the Millionaire' was that man. He luxuriated in the dismal surroundings of a sick room. His brightest conception of a pleasure-trip was to the Sulphur Springs, or the Hydropathic Establishment; his recreation, when he was unusually frisky, was a Turkish shampooing or a Russian bath.

The 'Lancet' was his favourite periodical, and (for his medical principles were generally orthodox) Messrs. Churchill's publications were his light literature. Whether from cause or effect I cannot say, but there was an evident connection between his tastes and his appearance, in his sickly, jaundical hue. He might have been the original of the schoolboy's doggerel, 'Did you ever—no I never—seed a fellow half so yellow?' His eyes were like over-ripe 'golden-drop' gooseberries, his teeth like irregular strips of orange-peel. His very hair was a dead dim gold, for which Time was rapidly giving change in silver. If, as the knowing ones said, 'gold stuck to his fingers,' he looked as if he had been overlaid with gold-leaf. Mr. Morton, the Millionaire, was not pretty.

Mr. Morton of Fenchurch Street is 'worth'

a million. Let us follow him away from the Exchange, where this valuation is as clearly understood as if it were marked on him, back and front, in figures, like the human sandwiches who carry themselves between advertising placards, up and down the streets. In his modest dingy bachelor's house, in Queen Square, on this night of September, 18—, what is Mr. Morton 'worth?' Looking at his sallow face and shrivelled form, you might say he is worth something to his Doctor, and that before long he will be 'worth' something to his undertaker; and then all his money-worth will descend to his heir, who will scarcely think a memory so gilded is 'worth' a regret. Is *that* Mr. Morton's heir, that handsome gentlemanly-looking man, who is his only companion to-night? That is Mr. Fielding, of Fernleigh Manor,

his cousin and late partner. Mr. Fielding is some years younger than his relative, about fifty or fifty-five, but he carries his age well; he wears his years as both men and women can do, if they try: as an ornament, not as a blemish. His tall and stately figure is set off by an attire fashionable and becoming, but with no pretensions to the fopperies of youth; though a toilette so faultless in its general effect could only have been completed by a studious attention to its smallest details. A valet? No, no valet could have dressed his elderly master like that. He would have given him more of the air of a 'petit-maître;' and there is nothing of the petit-maître about Mr. Fielding. A tailor? A tailor would have made him more of a dandy; there is no shade of the dandy about Mr. Fielding either. A man who at fifty-five can dress and look

like that must be a man of quick discernment and delicate taste, fully conscious of his own personal advantages, but in no danger of risking them by injudicious display. Mr. Fielding's hair, originally dark, is now, like his cousin's, faded and streaked with grey, but it waves in undiminished luxuriance, over a well-shaped though rather small head, and a low narrow forehead. So low is the forehead, that his eyes gleam forth from under his hair, that grows almost to his brows, with something of the look of a benignant buffalo. Rather strange eyes, Mr. Fielding has—dark grey eyes, with bushy eyebrows, and with something which if not exactly a squint, is at least strongly suggestive of obliquity. The two eyes are not altogether on good terms with each other. There is a perceptible tendency in them to deviate from their common focus,

which is only overcome by an effort on the part of their owner. When Mr. Fielding fixes his eyes on your face he does it with a slight contraction of the brows, a slight dilation of the pupils, that gives the idea of his holding them there by muscular force; and a cloudiness comes over them, as if they resented the constraint and were trying to escape from it, under cover of a fog of their own raising. They are, like an ill-assorted married couple, forced by the decencies of society to affect a unity of will and purpose against which they secretly revolt. His other features are regular and well marked, though with something of irresolution or timidity in their bland conciliating expression, and flexible wavering lines. As the invalid's nearest, if not his sole relative, and his most intimate and confidential friend, the world of course says that he will inherit

all Mr. Morton's wealth; but the world's 'of course,' in such matters especially, is by no means infallible. From the conversation of the gentlemen, we shall perhaps ascertain whether or not it is likely to prove so in this case.

'And so,' Morton was saying, 'you have actually carried out your romantic fancy, and are the proprietor of a part, at least, of the Fernleigh Estate, at last?'

'I don't see,' replied Fielding, a little stiffly, 'that there is anything particularly "romantic" in a man's wishing to regain his proper footing on the lands of his ancestors.'

'When his ancestors kicked him out, his proper footing, I should say, became difficult to determine.'

'My ancestors never kicked me out.'

'They could scarcely do so, except in a representative sense; but they kicked out

your progenitor very effectually when they disowned him, and forced him to abandon even his family name.'

'Ah,' said Fielding mournfully, 'that was a grave mistake of my great-grandfather's, certainly—but what could he do? He was a younger son, you know, of a family that had more blood than wealth; and when his father cast him off for marrying the pretty daughter of an obscure citizen, he was unwilling to decline the rich provision his father-in-law offered him on condition that he should enter into partnership with him, and adopt his name (for you are mistaken, Morton, in thinking that that proposal emanated from the Fernleighs).'

'For my part,' said Morton, 'I think that your very great grandfather acted quite sensibly—more sensibly than his descendant has done in taking so much pains to re-

unite himself to a family that has never missed him.'

'That is entirely a matter of feeling.'

'Granted. I suppose we all have our whims—at least, I know I have mine, and perhaps when I confide it to you, you will laugh at it, as I do at yours.'

'But, Morton, I do not see why you should laugh at my whim, nor why you should call it a whim at all. If the world—or at least that section of it with which you and I are most familiar—prize wealth above high birth, it does not certainly despise the union of both; and, since I have riches enough to give me position, why should I not confirm and enhance that position by asserting my claims to birth as well?'

'But was it necessary for the due recognition of those fantastical claims that you should go and bury yourself and your daughter in

an out-of-the-way Solshire village, merely to regain a small portion of the territory that your ancestor had forfeited?'

'It was necessary that my claim to kindred with the Fernleighs of Fernleigh should be admitted by the head of that family. It was desirable, especially for Margaret's sake, that the friendly relation between the two alienated branches of the family should be reestablished, and, from Sir Loys Fernleigh's retired mode of life, I could only accomplish these ends by becoming his near neighbour ——'

'By the way,' interrupted Morton, 'I was so very unwell when you told me about this business, some time ago, that I have quite forgotten whether you said that you *bought* Fernleigh Manor, or only *rented* it.'

'I have only rented it, but on a fifty years' lease, with all privileges; it is equivalent

to buying it almost, since the lease will outlast me, and I have only a daughter to succeed me.'

'True; and she could not succeed to the Fernleigh name, if she did to any of the estate.'

'That may be managed,' answered Mr. Fielding. 'I have a project that will meet that difficulty in every way.'

'To be sure, when she marries you can make your son-in-law take the name of Fernleigh, just as your great-grandfather was made to take that of Fielding.—Yes,' he continued musingly, 'that will answer very well for all parties.'

Mr. Fielding smiled, but said nothing. Mr. Morton proceeded:

'Well, then, Fielding, I give in my adhesion to *your* whim; let me see if you will be as compliant to *mine*. I have just made my will.'

'Indeed?' said his cousin with air of interest—too well bred to be eager. 'You have always expressed so much distaste for that sometimes-necessary transaction that I wonder you have brought yourself to complete it so soon!'

'So soon, do you call it? So late, you ought to say. I am sixty-two to-morrow (same birthday anniversary as Margaret's, by-the-by), and, with my constitutional infirmities, that is a riper old age than I could have hoped to reach.'

Mr. Fielding glanced at his friend's shrunken parchment face, and thought that in effect his 'ripeness' resembled that of a medlar; but he did not give utterance to this flattering sentiment, and Mr. Morton continued:

'You expect, no doubt, to be my heir, Fielding?'

Mr. Fielding coloured faintly at this abrupt apostrophe, but replied quietly:

'Really, my dear fellow, I have seen too much of testators' vagaries to calculate on your inheritance, either for my daughter or myself. Not one man in fifty makes his will as his survivors expected him to do. You cannot be more eccentric than a millionaire usually is, with pen and parchment before him.'

Mr. Morton exhibited his orange-peel teeth in a sardonic grin.

'I am glad you won't be disappointed, cousin; for, like you, I have my whims.'

Mr. Fielding bowed and smiled, and looked down upon his white well-shaped hands, as if they were more interesting to him, at that moment, than the trifling bequests of — a millionaire. But Morton seemed suddenly to wander from the subject.

'Fielding, you remember that wretched

business of Willoughby Evans' father, twenty years ago?'

'Of course I do. People always do remember painful things.'

'If it was painful to *you*, who were blameless in the matter, what must it be to me, who have the man's blood on my head?'

'It was an unfortunate accident, nothing more. You know, Morton, you are suspicious by nature—you can't help your nature—and that grave omission in Evans' ledger would have excited the suspicion of a man less addicted than you are to that special infirmity.'

'It did not arouse yours.'

'No; because I had for some time observed a failure of memory in the man; and his previous integrity weighed much in his favour.'

'You were right, and I was wrong. Had I only waited, before expressing my injurious suspicions, the unhappy man would not have destroyed himself, in his terror and despair.'

'Well, well, you made all possible reparation; you maintained the widow till she died, and you educated her orphan son, unwisely, in my opinion, for a position higher than any he is ever likely to attain. You took him into your office, with a most liberal salary, and thus opened to him the road that led you to fortune. You have made *him*, at least, full compensation.'

Morton cast rather a queer glance at the speaker.

'You think, then, that money—mere money—can compensate to a man such an injury as that I have inflicted on this youth's family, and on himself?'

'I suppose so; at least when it is the only compensation within your power.'

'I am glad of that; but there is something else I can do besides. You don't dispute that Willoughby has shown himself deserving of all the advantages I have given him?'

'I don't dispute it,' answered Fielding carelessly. 'He is steady enough, so far as I know—active, intelligent, and of good business habits. He is a useful servant; but I doubt his capacity for anything above that. He has a devil of a temper.'

'A servant,' repeated Morton peevishly. 'You have a haughty way of expressing yourself; but you admit that he is steady, intelligent, gentlemanly?'

'Pardon me, I never said he was gentlemanly. He is tolerably well-behaved; but my idea of a gentleman is something

higher than is realised by your confidential clerk.'

Mr. Morton laughed good-humouredly.

'You are a consistent aristocrat, Fielding; but I, whose fathers were never Fernleighs of Fernleigh, am less exacting than you are. I think Evans is gentlemanly, and the world, I am sure, will take my view of that point when it is enforced by the bequest of all, or nearly all, I have to leave.'

Mr. Fielding started, and changed colour, when his cousin made this startling and unexpected announcement; but he said not a syllable, and Mr. Morton went on.

'But, my good friend, I have not forgotten my pretty god-daughter's claims, you will see; nor, as I have reason to believe, have I disregarded her wishes in the disposal of my wealth. I have left it to Evans, on the condition of his immediate marriage with Margaret.'

Mr. Fielding turned on the speaker a look of astonishment and disgust.

'I am obliged to you,' he answered, 'for your kind consideration of my daughter's interests, but I must decline the flattering alliance you propose for her. I have higher views for her than that.'

'Indeed! and what may those views be? I think I can guess. You want to marry Margaret to one of Sir Loys Fernleigh's sons, and thus rivet your claim to be a branch of the family? But Sir Loys is not rich. He can settle nothing on his daughter-in-law, and will probably look for a connection that will raise, instead of depressing, the fortunes which, report says, are already on the decline.'

Mr. Fielding reddened with vexation.

'A marriage with my daughter will depress no man's fortune. Margaret inherits eight hundred a year from her grandmother

when she comes of age, and I hope to leave her at least double as much at my death.'

'Of course, I know that; but you are a young man still; you may marry again, and have a second family. What is eight hundred a year to what I can leave to Margaret's husband? "Morton the millionaire," you know. A pretty alliteration, isn't it? When you were a youth, they used to call you "Temporising Tom;" come now, justify that sobriquet, and agree to a parley. I'll settle half my fortune on your girl if you will consent to her marriage with Evans.'

During this speech 'Temporising Tom' had been girding himself for the battle of whim against whim, with his own characteristic weapons.

'After all,' he thought, 'all's not lost that is in danger.' Morton had always talked about making his will, but had always evaded

doing so, on some excuse or another. Very likely he was only *thinking* about it now. He was not dying yet; although, certainly, this last illness had been a severe one. But he would recover, and then this morbid notion of an exaggerated remorse, and still more exaggerated atonement, would pass over. There was no use in reasoning against a sick man's diseased fancies, or in provoking him to obstinacy by needless contradiction. Let us humour him a little—gain time—we can but quarrel at the last. So he inquired, with an air of mild interest:

'Why do you attach such a singular condition to your bequest to Willoughby, cousin? What could have put into your head that such a union could be agreeable to any of the parties interested in it?'

'That is my secret. I have reason to believe that these young people have long been

attached to one another. I can understand that you would object to your daughter's marriage with an obscure dependant; but you will see that the heir to my fortune will be a far better match for her than the son of a penniless baronet.'

'It is impossible there can be any such attachment as you suppose; they have never been together.'

'You are mistaken. When Margaret lived with your mother-in-law—in your late wife's time—all the business communication you held with Lady Tolmaine passed through Willoughby's hands, and he was a frequent visitor at her house.'

'Lady Tolmaine was the very last person to encourage such an intimacy.'

Morton laughed.

'My dear fellow, how long is it since you resumed your charge of your daughter?'

'On her grandmother's death—about six month's ago.'

'Well, when you have had the charge of a young girl for six years you will know better than you do now what is the extent of influence that any relative can exert successfully, to prevent an intimacy between two young people who are inclined to form one. Do you think that I would have tried to promote this marriage, if I had not believed that I was consulting Margaret's wishes in doing so?'

Mr. Fielding mused.

'I don't pretend to much experience in girls' love fancies, but I certainly think that the way in which Margaret receives Mr. Caryl Fernleigh's attentions is quite inconsistent with the idea of a prior attachment.'

'Mere coquetry, perhaps, to throw dust in your eyes.'

'I hardly believe it. However, of course, if Margaret's inclinations take the direction you suppose, your proposal is less—less preposterous than it would otherwise be. Still it would always be most distasteful to me, for reasons irrespective of your protege's low birth and low breeding; for all your schooling has not made a gentleman of him, and all your money will not, either.'

'The fact is, Fielding, you hope to see your daughter Lady Fernleigh some day; but when Evans has got my money he can buy a peerage, if he likes.'

'He cannot buy an unblemished descent from our Saxon Kings. A peerage! Why Sir Charles Fernleigh, my grandfather's first cousin, refused a peerage, and so did his son, the present Sir Loys' father.'

'What is young Fernleigh like?'

'Caryl Fernleigh? He is a very fine young

fellow indeed. I am sure you would say so if you saw him. A youth any woman could fancy.'

'Ah! I have been told he has delicate health—insane, or epileptic, or something?'

'Nonsense! he is no more insane than you are. No Fernleigh ever was insane. He is no more epileptic than I am. Nor is he in delicate health. He had a serious illness two or three years back, when the family were in Italy, I believe. A shock of some kind; but that's all over. He's as fine a young fellow now as you would wish to see. Your favourite Evans is no more to be compared to him than a crow is to an eaglet.'

'Well, the world will not look at your eaglet, when I have gilded the plumes of my crow to the tune of some thousands at least; for you know, Tom, that the story

of my being a millionaire is only a fiction founded on fact.'

Mr. Fielding's commercial instinct woke up at this remark, and he inquired with great interest—

'More of the fact than of the fiction, is there not, Morton? You have been *coining* money since I quitted the firm.'

Morton chuckled.

'You'd like to know the exact sum I bid for your whim, eh? Nothing like figures; it is all down in black and white in my will?'

'Just so,' replied his friend, with a carelessness that was rather over acted; 'but you have been talking of that will, to my knowledge, for the last ten years, and have always postponed it till the next successful speculation should bring you more to leave in it.'

'You don't believe that I can resolve to

settle my last business, then? Look here!' And, unlocking a writing-table that stood beside him, Morton drew thence a small portfolio in a peculiar binding, richly chased, and inlaid with silver. 'This,' he said, unlocking it with a small key that hung on his watch chain, 'is of Portuguese workmanship; it is a gift from my old friend Losada. I could not show it greater honour than by entrusting it with the voucher for my future heir's wealth.'

As he spoke, he took from it a folded parchment, which he handed to his cousin, watching him as he perused it with a sly smile that said, 'the fish will surely rise to *that* bait.' The paper was in his own handwriting, and comprised only four or five pages, as, with the exception of a few trifling bequests, his whole property was left without reservation to Willoughby Evans,

his book-keeper and managing clerk. Mr. Fielding looked up.

'There is no mention of any marriage here?'

'I did not mean to state it in the document; it will be a private arrangement. I'm not dead yet. I should like to give away the bride.'

'Throw her away, you mean,' growled the father, resuming the reading.

The amount of Morton's wealth was stated with clearness and precision, and far exceeded Mr. Fielding's calculations. His eyes widened as he read; his brow flushed when, glancing at the bottom of the last page, he suddenly flung the parchment on the table, laughing softly.

'This is my old friend all over,' he cried. 'Why the thing is not signed! It is valueless.'

'Oh, as for signing, that can be done any

day; to-night if I choose; a turn of the pen does that. I have only to ring the bell for witnesses. But I thought I'd consult you first. If you agree to take Evans as a son-in-law, I will make alterations to secure a handsome settlement on the bride.'

Mr. Fielding rose.

'You must allow me to ascertain my daughter's wishes first. I am going to the Manor House to-morrow. I will have an explanation with her, and let you know the result.'

'Don't let it be too late, Tom; there's no time to lose.'

'Pshaw! you always say that when you're hipped. You are good for ten years yet.'

But even while the merchant spoke, it struck him that his cousin looked older and yellower, more haggard and drawn to-night, than he had ever seen him. The invalid

noticed the momentary hesitation, and grinned one of his sardonic smiles.

'*I* never temporise, Tom; and death never temporises with us. I'll give you a week for your decision. If you are silent then, or refuse my offer, that paper shall be signed as it stands. I'll have no tampering with Margaret's affections. If the girl loves Willoughby, and he loves her, I'll make it worth any one's while to receive him into their family. You'll hardly be such a fool as to prefer your cousin in the tenth degree, with a few paltry hundreds, to *my* heir with as many thousands.'

'One word—does Evans know of this?'

'No; he does not dream of it. Why, it would have turned the lad's head; and it was only fair to speak to you first.'

'Then, from whom did you learn that he was attached to my daughter?'

'Well, then, it was from Lowndes—who lived with your mother-in-law, before I engaged him. He told me that he had often seen letters pass between Mr. Evans and Miss Fielding.'

'Letters! Ah! Good night, cousin; you shall hear from me in a day or two.'

'Good night; send Lowndes up to me as you go down stairs.'

CHAPTER II.

RETROSPECTIVE.

And, winged with her innumerable sails,
Commerce has made all winds her ministers,
And with the riches of all happier skies
Warmed our cold air. **STERLING.**

MR. FIELDING quitted his friend's house early the following morning, without seeing him again, as he had an appointment to keep for him, at his office, which he not unfrequently did, when he chanced to be in town, and when Morton himself was detained at home by sickness. He was bound to be at Fernleigh Manor by six o'clock, as

he had invited a small party of neighbours to celebrate his daughter's nineteenth birthday. And Hartsknoll, the nearest railway station, was six hours' journey from London, by rail. He reached the office at nine o'clock—before all the clerks had yet assembled—and lounging into an inner room, sacred to the privacy of the principals of the firm, sat down in his old place at the desk where, for many years, he had been occupied in amassing the fortune that he had lately retired to enjoy. It is strange, however, in the most practical men a boyish dream will sometimes become so deeply rooted in the feelings and imagination, that not all the bustling realities of life will enfeeble or displace it. Not seldom do we see a man who has 'risen from the ranks' by successful industry or enterprise relinquish the place that he has won among

the higher tiers of society, to go back to his native town or village, where the humbleness of his origin constantly faces him, in the lowness of station in which his nearest relatives and former associates still remain. It had been the dream of his boyhood, that when he had achieved success he would return to enjoy it among them; and no newer hope, no higher ambition, has had power to dispel that. The dream of Mr. Fielding's youth had been, that he would some day claim his re-admission into the well-descended, though far from wealthy, family that had renounced his ancestor.

No sooner had he found himself rich enough to retire from the fatigues and anxiety of business than he had hastened to seek the acquaintance of Sir Loys Fernleigh, the head and representative of his ancestral house; and had easily accomplished this by

offering himself as tenant for Fernleigh Manor, an old place closely adjoining the Park, which, with the land surrounding it, Sir Loys had been for some time desirous of letting.

The old baronet gladly accepted the refined and wealthy merchant as a tenant and neighbour, and courteously admitted his claim to relationship. Money and taste speedily converted the old Manor House into a charming country residence, and Mr. Fielding's dearest ambition seemed in a fair way to be realised, when the evident admiration of Sir Loy's eldest son for the young mistress of the Manor House awakened the hope that before long the severed branch would be re-grafted into the parent stem, and that even the ancient title might one day be worn by his descendants. All had gone merry as a marriage bell, and to the

chime of a marriage bell, in Mr. Fielding's imagination, until that untoward declaration of Morton's had dispelled his visions as rudely as a stone cast into a lake disperses its mirrored landscape. Will the merchant's visions re-form again, as readily? It wanted some minutes yet to the hour fixed for Mr. Sheridan's coming; and leaning forward on his desk he fell to musing on the conversation he had held with his cousin, and wondering if there were any grounds for his statement that Miss Fielding and Willoughby Evans were attached to one another. A clandestine correspondence, too! Could Margaret be guilty of that? The high-spirited, intellectual Margaret; he should have thought her superior to such a vulgar meanness, and yet, after all, what did he really know of his daughter? Four or five months ago she was almost a stranger to

him. Her mother, when young and pretty, had won him by the contrast of her delicate drooping beauty and meek dove-like timidity, to the masculine dignity and overbearing severity of a stern and harsh mother (the widow of a city knight), by whom the girl was terribly overawed. Mr. Fielding had an abhorrence of 'strong-minded women;' and when he wedded Miss Tolmaine, he committed a not uncommon mistake in confounding weakness with delicacy, and feebleness of will and purpose for the self-devotion of love. It is true, that the too strict rule of a disciplinarian mother, who 'did not believe in nerves,' had crushed out of a weak organisation such youthful vivacity as might have survived under more judicious treatment, and increased constitutional timidity into arrant cowardice. But although the flower

was paler and more etiolated than it would have proved under more genial influences, it was but a poor weedy thing after all; and so Mr. Fielding found it to his cost. His wife's most decided feeling was a dread of her mother; and at her request she resigned to her the charge of her first-born daughter, much as a heathen mother may sacrifice one of her offspring to Juggernaut, to purchase peace and prosperity for the rest. The Tolmaine Juggernaut accepted the sacrifice, and fully conscious of the coldness, not to say aversion, with which she was regarded in her son-in-law's house, she withdrew herself from such uncongenial society, in contempt, to a distant suburb, where she consoled herself by educating the child that had been surrendered to her after her own system, and apart from counteracting influence.

Year after year Mr. Fielding listened patiently to the endless complainings of his whining pining wife. Year after year a whining pining baby fretted a few months upon the scene, and then dwindled away into the land of shadows. At last, the sickly mother herself died, not much more suffering, nor much more complaining at the last than she had been from the first; and her husband had hardly set his house in order, or made up his mind as to whether he was most glad or sorry for his bereavement, when old Lady Tolmaine, still active and robust, died suddenly, and Margaret, then a girl of eighteen, whom he had never seen oftener than twice a year, for a day or two, since he had given her up to her grandmother, was left to his sole care; and he had withdrawn with her in the early summer to his new residence of Fernleigh Manor. During the

few months she had been his companion his attention had been so engrossed with business matters in connection with his recent dissolution of partnership, and with the superintendence of alterations in the house and grounds, that he had given little heed to the study of the young girl's character, and was positively unable to decide on the probability of Mr. Morton's statement that she was secretly attached to the clerk. While he was pondering on this assertion, a careless knock sounded at the door, and he turned to behold the unconscious object of his meditations, in the person of a tall handsome young man of about six-and-twenty, who approached him with an air of rather forced deference, and the inquiry whether he meant to take the 10.30 train for Hartsknoll? So simple a question did not demand much deliberation to reply, and Willoughby

Evans was a little surprised, and even slightly embarrassed, by the look of intent scrutiny which for a moment or two was his principal's only answer. Mr. Fielding had never liked Evans, and of course the clerk was instinctively aware of the prejudice against him, and consequently did not much like Mr. Fielding. But this mutual dislike had always been a passive feeling, never shown by reproof on the one side or by avoidance on the other. On the contrary, the young man had been frequently received at Mr. Fielding's house, at Mr. Morton's request—not certainly on the footing of a favourite guest, but on terms of tolerated intimacy; and Evans, doubtless for private reasons of his own, showed no consciousness, if he felt any, that his visits were rather permitted than welcomed. His self-possession, however, was not proof against the mysterious earnestness

of Fielding's gaze into his face, as he stood waiting the answer to his question about the train. One might have thought that he had some guilty secret in his heart, and was fearful lest his features might betray it, for his keen black eyes shifted uneasily beneath those of the merchant, and a faint colour rose to his rather sallow cheek. He was evidently relieved when Fielding turned from him, saying carelessly:

'I beg your pardon, Mr. Evans; I could not recall my thoughts at once from a calculation they were engaged in. What were you asking me?'

The clerk repeated the question.

'The 10.30 train? Yes, of course, I must be at home this evening. Sheridan was to have met me here; but it is after his time, and I can't wait for him any longer. By-the-by, are you going with me to Fernleigh?'

Again Evans coloured. He was not ordinarily so bashful, but some subtle change from Mr. Fielding's usual manner evidently discomposed him.

'I did not think of going, sir,' he answered. 'I have not presumed upon a general invitation to ——'

'Yes, yes, just so; quite right.' Evans' brow darkened. 'However, if you would like to accompany me—you have never seen Fernleigh Manor yet—I shall be very glad of your company for a couple of days. You can be spared from the office for that time; there is nothing much doing here just now?'

'Oh no, sir, nothing that Fraser cannot manage quite well without me.'

'Very well; then run up to your lodgings for your "traps," and meet me at the Euston Square Station.'

A command which the clerk obeyed with great alacrity, and blessing his stars for the good luck. Little he knew how that luck would end.

CHAPTER III.

MET AT THE STATION.

Sweeter than Spring!
Thou sole surviving blossom from the root
That nourished up my fortunes. THOMSON.

THE iron horse snorted merrily on its way to Hartsknoll, and Mr. Fielding pursued his meditations in silence, and apparent disregard of his clerk's presence. It was his habit never to talk in a railway carriage. He never talked much to Evans at any time, so that the young man was neither surprised nor offended at his taciturnity now, and little dreamt how deeply interested he him-

self was in his reflections. The more Mr. Fielding thought of his cousin's proposal, the more his soul revolted from it. That such a fellow as *that* should step in between his child and her rightful inheritance; that such a nauseous alliance as *that* should be the sole alternative to the loss of what he had always considered her inalienable right! A servant! he scarcely looked upon him in any other light; the son of his salaried dependent, who had destroyed himself on the accusation (though false) of dishonesty. He had looked to his only daughter to retrieve the honours of her ancient lineage—obscured, but never disgraced. And she was to sink to this! He almost shuddered. No, it would be better to let the money go. As the wife of Sir Caryl Fernleigh, she would be entitled to more respect than if she married that vulgar underbred. But if she preferred

him? Well, he supposed that if she *did* care for him there was no remedy but to consent with a good grace, and console himself, as most fathers would very gladly do, with the promise of a settlement for her that would far outvalue all the lands of Fernleigh, seven times over. But *could* she prefer him to Caryl? Here Mr. Fielding raised his eyes, and gazed at his companion, as if he were taking his likeness. 'Good-looking.' Well, he must admit that, though with a certain coarseness in the outlines both of face and form that would develope itself very disagreeably in a few years. Black eyes, curling black hair, and luxuriant whiskers (they had just been freshly oiled, pah!), white teeth, broad shoulders, and powerful chest. To some girls—he had hoped not to a girl of *his*—this inventory of personal attractions would have represented

a perfect Antinoüs. And Mr. Fielding *hated* his possible son-in-law with an intense loathing. Just then Willoughby, still innocently unconscious of his companion's unfriendly observation, looked up from an admiring contemplation of his new lavender gloves, and met Fielding's eyes. A man of more delicate susceptibility would have read a hostile meaning in those eyes; but Evans only thought that the old gentleman looked uncommonly sulky to-day. He would have looked sulky in his turn, if he could have read the unflattering comments on him that were passing through the 'old gentleman's' mind; but how he would have rejoiced and exulted if he could have suspected the cause of his enmity! He wondered why Fielding should have invited him to Fernleigh Manor to-day of all days. He had never been asked to Fernleigh before, and had begun to

debate the expediency of inviting himself there, and accepting the invitation. Mr. Fielding himself did not quite know why he had invited him. It had been a momentary impulse, arising partly from the wish to remove him from intercourse with Morton, in his present humour, and partly from a desire to observe him more closely in the new character of Morton's heir and Margaret's lover. And the more he considered him under these probable aspects the less he liked him.

A 'skeleton scream' from the steed of Vulcan announces that the weary journey is at an end. Mr. Fielding rouses himself and looks out. A servant in a well-made mourning livery stands on the platform, awaiting his master's arrival. At a little distance, without the railway gates, is drawn up a low basket-carriage, with a pair of minia-

ture ponies, that stand unmoved, as modern horses do, amid the smoke, rattle, and fizz that would have driven their sires frantic. In the carriage sat a young girl, holding the reins in a firm, though seemingly careless, grasp, while she repulsed the playful solicitations of a little spaniel on her knee, to descend and join the travellers on the platform. She looked up and smiled, as her father approached her; she smiled, too, as her eyes fell on his companion, but, sharpened as was Mr. Fielding's observation by watchful suspicion, he could detect no flutter of agitation or excitement in that quiet smile.

'Margaret, my love, I have brought you another birthday guest. You can make room for Mr. Evans at your table to-day?'

'Oh, certainly, papa, with pleasure; but (as she shook hands with Willoughby) I am

afraid I cannot make room for you in the carriage—the back seat is only just large enough for little Graves.'

'Never mind, dear; Mr. Evans will be glad to stretch his legs a little, after his long ride, I daresay. Look, Mr. Evans, you have only to cross that turnip field—you see the foot-path? At the edge of the wood that skirts it is my gamekeeper's lodge. Stop—Margaret, have you brought the key of the wicket-gate with you?'

'Yes, here it is. I brought it in case you might choose to walk home, as you sometimes do.'

'If Meredith is at the lodge, Mr. Evans, he will show you the way to the Manor, across the Beechen Coppice; if not, here is the key of the gate—please to lock it after you—and you can scarcely miss the path that leads straight to the Manor shrubberies.

Step out, and you will be there before we shall, as the road takes a wide circuit round the plantations which you cut across.'

The young man took the key without remark, but as he turned away, Mr. Fielding saw, or fancied he saw, that his eyes sought Margaret's with a look of mute intelligence. But he detected no answering glance. Miss Fielding was again occupied in repressing the untimely gambols of her dog. As he took his seat beside her, he said:

'You had better not bring Frisk out with you again, my child; he distracts your attention from your horses, and some accident may happen.'

'I am not afraid, papa; I can attend to my horses and my dog too.'

'I was taught in my youth, Margaret, that the way to do anything well is to do it as if it were the one only thing in life.

A divided attention is as worthless as a divided heart.'

He said this with some significance, but the young lady only laughed carelessly, and he continued:

'I scarcely expected that you would meet me to-day—on your first reception day. I fancied you would be busy preparing for your guests.'

'So soon, papa? Why it wants two hours to dinner-time. What preparations could I have to make?'

'Oh, I don't know; I don't profess to understand those mysteries. I fancied that young ladies shut themselves up for hours when they were about to emerge in full panoply to encounter a lover or a rival.'

Again Margaret laughed—a pretty silver laugh, but with something of a *metallic* ring in it.

'You are inclined to be *railleur* to-day, papa. Neither rival nor lover have I to arm for.'

'I have no wish to force your confidence, my love; though believe me, if you would honour me with it you would find me a safe if not a skilful adviser.'

She turned her bright brown eyes upon him with a wondering questioning glance, but made no reply. He went on.

'I have been longer away than I intended, dear; have you paid me the compliment of wishing for my return?'

'Yes, indeed, papa; I thought you had deserted me entirely. You said you were only going away for two days, and you have been gone a whole week.'

'My absence was quite compulsory, I assure you; but I left you in good hands. Our kind neighbours at the Park I am sure

would do all in their power to supply my loss?'

'There was not much in their power,' answered his daughter. 'Sir Loys is laid up with the gout. Helen Grenfell has been on a visit to the Heath. She is coming with the Blakes to-day. Mrs. Grenfell wrote and asked me to spend a few days at the Park, but I declined as Helen was away, and Sir Loys ill.'

'But Mr. Fernleigh is at home? Have you seen much of him?'

'Not much. I suppose he was afraid of violating *les convenances* by calling often at the Manor when there was only so young a châtelaine to receive him there.'

'He was in the right; but, my child, you must have been rather dull? Still you have more mental resources than most girls; you had your books and your music.'

'Yes,' answered Miss Fielding rather listlessly, 'I had my books and my piano, but I don't feel settled enough yet to resume my old studies. My life has so changed since my grandmamma's death, I am quite in a new world now.'

'Don't say that, my love, or I shall fancy that your words imply a reproach against me for having permitted so long an alienation from your father's house that it seems a new world to you. At least, it is not an unhappy one, Margaret?'

'Oh no, papa, I never meant a reproach; how could I? You are so kind and indulgent to me; and although I feel some strangeness in my new position, it is not a painful strangeness; only don't go away again and leave me so long alone.'

'I will not, love; but I hope to win your forgiveness by bringing your old friend,

Willoughby Evans, back with me; you used to see more of him than you have done since you came to Hartsknoll?'

Here the ponies suddenly stopped short, either from curiosity to hear their young mistress's rejoinder, or by reason of a check involuntarily given by her on the reins. If the latter, the impatient 'flick' administered to them by the driver was a little unjust. She said nothing, however, and her father went on.

'This is the first time that I have invited Evans to the Manor House; but had you expressed a wish to see him oftener, like every wish of yours it should have been gratified.'

'Did I express a wish to see him oftener? —to see him at all?' asked Margaret, drily. 'Is it to please me that you have brought him down to-day?'

'Not altogether; I only meant that as you complain of feeling strange among your new friends, it would perhaps give you pleasure to see an old acquaintance—eh? Margaret?'

But Margaret's attention was absorbed in the endeavour to get a knot out of her whip-lash, and she was silent.

'To tell the truth, I think it is rather a questionable kindness to bring Evans into the society of our neighbours at the Park, the contrast is so very unfavourable to him. He is a clever fellow in his way, but inclined to be forward and conceited, I think. I doubt if his companionship would be very congenial to such a man as Caryl Fernleigh.'

Margaret could not answer, because she was engaged in untying the knot on her lash with her pretty white teeth.

'Margaret!' cried her father, horrified;

'for heaven's sake! you will ruin your teeth! Whoever heard of a lady's putting her lips to a nasty whip-cord?'

'It *will* always get into knots.'

'Unskilful driving, Miss Fielding; when you have had a little more practice you will not get your whip-lash into knots;—there, it is out, now. As I was saying, Evans, though a leetle vulgar and forward, is ——'

Here the carriage suddenly jolted against a great heap of stones on the roadside, and the unlucky little page was jerked clear out of his seat, and sat enthroned upon the flints, like the image of a wood-god on a grotto. Happily, boys are not made of brittle material, so little Graves improved the situation, by springing from his stony perch, to run forward and open the lodge gates, which they had just reached when

the calamity occurred. Mr. Fielding laughed heartily.

'Really, my daughter, if this is your usual style of driving, I must get a gutta percha groom to ride behind you. All lads might not feel so little inconvenience as seems to have resulted to Graves from his abrupt transference from a carriage to a stone-heap. Here we are, safe and sound. Heaven be praised, rather than your skill; and here is Mr. Evans waiting for us. Be so good as to take the little dog, Mr. Evans, while I hand out my daughter.'

And Mr. Fielding adroitly popped the little spaniel into Willoughby's reluctant arms, and assisted Margaret to alight, remaining beside her until she ran upstairs to dress for dinner, which she did after a few words of welcome to her unexpected guest.

CHAPTER IV.

OUR HEROINE.

It were not well
To blazon her too much, for mounted thus
In your esteem she might not hold her place,
But fall the farther for her fancied rise;
For she has faults, Silisco; she has faults,
And when you see them, you may think them worse
Than I who know, or think I know, their scope.

The Virgin Widow.

In the two rooms set apart for Miss Fielding's special privacy there was a simplicity—almost a severity of taste such as should always prevail in a young girl's chamber. In these rooms, as everywhere at the Manor House, there was the evidence of

wealth; suggested, rather than ostentatiously displayed, and kept in strict subordination to a tasteful refinement. Nothing useless or cumbrous had been chosen, merely because fashionable or expensive. Nothing, however costly, was lacking that could be found essential for comfort or convenience. The only ornament the dressing-room contained—if, indeed, it could be considered an ornament—was the half-length portrait, in oil, of an elderly lady, in a widow's dress. Not the becoming, half-coquettish costume now in vogue, but the hideous, corpse-like swathings in which conscientious mourners, forty years ago, disguised from mortal men the charms, if they possessed any, consecrated to the memory of the dead. But the rigid and ungraceful habit was in perfect keeping with the harsh features and rugged outlines of the wearer in

the picture. The face was faded, the form was bony and shrunken; but even in early youth that face could never have had much softness, or that figure much rounded grace. The original, Mr. Fielding's not very deeply lamented mother-in-law, was the grand-dame to whose care Margaret had been entrusted in her infancy, and whose memory she held in veneration, if not in tenderness. But Lady Tolmaine had done everything in her power to repress all the tenderness that existed in her grand-child's character. She could not therefore have complained, and probably would not have complained, that the feeling with which she was now remembered was one of respectful awe, rather than loving regret. If the old lady had been bodily present in Margaret's room this evening, she would hardly have approved of the maiden's prolonged contem-

plation of herself in the cheval-glass, before which she was yet standing when her maid had quitted her, and the first dinner-bell was about to sound. To do her justice, she was not greatly addicted to this feminine (is it *exclusively* feminine?) recreation; but she seemed profoundly interested in it to-day, as she stood, arrayed in pure white, without a single ornament of flower or gem, gazing with a grave air of quite dispassionate criticism on the reflection her mirror gave back to her. It was a reflection that could bear criticism well, too. Margaret was not, strictly speaking, beautiful; but the glance that once dwelt upon her would seek her again and again, when it had wearied of more faultless beauty than hers.

Her features, in their delicacy and regularity, resembled her father's, but the decision and energy which were wanting in his face

were strongly indicated in hers, by the well-defined arch of her brows and curve of her lips, in the clear steady gaze of her bright eyes. Her hair was of that tint which 'friends call auburn, and enemies call red;' when both friends and enemies are wrong. It was of that peculiar hue you see in winter, on a hill-side covered with bracken, when—and only when—a sudden flash of wintry sunshine brightens it into russet gold. If there is truth in the assertion that a profusion of hair indicates force of vitality, and that curling hair expresses strength of will, then Margaret possessed both these characteristics, for the crisp wave of her tresses was drawn back from her white forehead, and wound in coil upon coil round a graceful head, which they crowned like a queenly diadem. Her figure was not above the middle height, and had the

girlish slightness of her age; but the elastic gait, and almost defiant carriage, made her appear taller than she really was. Her complexion, fair and pure, was usually rather colourless, but this evening some inward excitement had kindled a pink flush on her cheek that made her really charming. She seemed conscious of the advantage, for as she turned from the glass she smiled a satisfied smile, and with a step buoyant and light as a bird's on a spray, she fled down the stairs into the drawing-room, where her friend Willoughby Evans awaited her alone. It had been no part of Mr. Fielding's design to allow this tête-à-tête to the suspected lovers, but he had not reckoned on Margaret's toilette being completed before his own, and Willoughby had been on the watch for his opportunity, and hastened to seize it. Advancing eagerly to meet his young hostess,

he exclaimed, half tenderly, half reproachfully, as he took her hand—

'At last!'

'At last!' repeated the lady, withdrawing her hand with a little impatient pull. 'I think I have been very quick, considering that it was five o'clock when I drove up to the house, and it is only half-past six now!'

And so saying, she seated herself on a low ottoman (where there was only room for one), and spread out her floating skirts all round her, so as to isolate herself, as it were, in a cloud of lace and muslin.

'And at seven,' rejoined Evans, 'all those people will be here. I have only half-an-hour, in which to tell you of all my lonely wretchedness, during the last four months, while I have lived far from the sunshine of your presence.'

'Sunshine of nonsense!' answered Mar-

garet, unfeelingly. 'I am sorry, Mr. Evans, that you should resume the silly sentimental strain for which I was compelled to break off our correspondence. By the way, have you brought my letters, which you promised to return me?'

The young man bit his lips, and an expression flitted over his countenance that was not prepossessing; but he tried to disguise it with a smile.

'I will bring you back your letters, Miss Margaret, when you have added to the collection. At present it is not worth bringing; why will you persist in requiring me to surrender all the memorials that are left me of a dearly-valued friendship?'

'Because, for one thing, they are foolish, childish compositions, that I am ashamed of, and because—' She stopped, looked up, and meeting Willoughby's eyes blushed faintly,

but added, with firmness, 'and because, from the tone you latterly tried to give that correspondence, I think that you misunderstood my feeling in engaging in it.'

'I will understand it in any sense you choose, dearest friend, only restore your precious confidence to me. Those were happy times for me, when I could minister ever so little to your pleasure or amusement; but I thought you were too generous to cast me off, when you had no longer need of me.'

'I never had need of you,' answered Margaret haughtily, 'and I should not have withdrawn my confidence from you if you had not abused it.'

'How did I abuse it?'

'By trying to give a clandestine character to my correspondence, when I returned to my father's house.'

'You misinterpret me cruelly, Miss Margaret; your grandmamma, you know, did not object to your writing to me occasionally.'

'On literary subjects,' interposed Miss Fielding.

'On literary subjects, of course; but if I could not latterly confine myself to those, I think she would not have very severely blamed me.'

'I think she would have blamed you,' answered Margaret, 'but you took advantage of her ill-health to write, as I am sure you would not have written had she continued able to read your letters; and you confessed yourself that my father would at no time have approved of them.'

'Now you are widening your accusation against me, and,'—glancing at the clock,—'I have not time to justify myself; give me half an hour alone with you to-morrow; and if I

fail to reinstate myself in your good opinion you shall have back your letters, and I will remember—what I ought never to have forgotten—that I am only the poor, paid, dependent of your wealthy relatives.'

Margaret's girlish generosity was touched by this appeal. Evans saw that she wavered, and hastened to press his advantage.

'Just one half hour—when we shall not be interrupted—in the shrubberies, before Mr. Fielding comes down to breakfast. Just a brief explanation, and misunderstanding on either side will be thenceforth impossible.'

'But,' objected the young lady, 'you are staying here; there will be time enough for you to explain anything you wish in the course of the day.'

'I may have no opportunity of being alone with you, and no security against interruption—however, perhaps I had better write,

since you are afraid to trust yourself with me.'

'Afraid!' she echoed, scornfully; 'I am certainly not afraid of you, Mr. Evans. We breakfast at nine; at eight, if you wish it, you will find me in the conservatory if it rains, or on the walk below the terrace.'

'At eight punctually,' answered Willoughby, 'I shall be waiting ——'

'Not so long as that, I hope,' said Mr. Fielding, whose entrance had cut short the reply; 'if it is your dinner you mean, you won't wait so long as till eight o'clock for it, for seven is our hour, and I hear carriage-wheels driving up now.'

And to Willoughby and Margaret's great relief, a peal rang at the hall-door, and presently the footman announced, 'Sir James and Lady Blake, and Mr. and Miss Benson.'

CHAPTER V.

ALLOW ME TO INTRODUCE.

High nature, amorous of the good,
  Yet touched with no ascetic gloom;
And passion pure in snowy bloom
  Through all the years of April blood.
IN MEMORIAM.

MARGARET was a little surprised at the substitution of the curate, Mr. Benson, and his sister for Miss Grenfell of Fernleigh, whom she had expected would have accompanied Lady Blake; but she was informed that Miss Grenfell had preferred returning to the Park, to come with her stepmother; and that Sir James had offered his seat in the carriage to

Miss Benson, who was on a visit to her brother; and that the clergyman had walked forward and waited for them at the lodge. While this little explanation was being given the party from the Park arrived, Mrs. and Miss Grenfell, and Mr. Fernleigh. Mrs. Grenfell, Sir Loys Fernleigh's widowed sister, was a lady in advanced middle life. She had once been handsome, with that kind of beauty that looks made up of swansdown and rose leaves. 'Florence the Fair,' men called her then; but since the swansdown had smothered the roses, the irreverent styled her 'Fat Flo.' Her beauty might have been sweet in the bud, but the blossom had long been sadly overblown! She looked something like what one could imagine a Brobdignagian baby, with her white unwrinkled forehead and trebly-folded chin, her half open lips and wandering blue eyes.

Everybody laughed at Mrs. Grenfell, and everybody liked her; she was so thoroughly inoffensive. She was never a bit of a 'bore;' you might drop her without ceremony whenever you tired of her, she would never find it out or fancy herself slighted; and as she was singularly slow and lethargic, you could come back at your leisure, and pick her up just where you dropped her. She had married late in life the British Consul of a seaport town in France. Mr. Grenfell lived only a few months after his second marriage, and had left his little daughter to the guardianship of Sir Loys Fernleigh, with whom the orphan and her stepmother had resided ever since his death, some eight or nine years ago. The young man who had the weighty charge of escorting Mrs. Grenfell was her nephew, the heir of Fernleigh.

Caryl Fernleigh was about five-and-twenty.

His figure, tall and slight, was graceful and well made, but there was a certain languor in his movements that to an experienced observer would have told of mental or bodily suffering that had but recently been surmounted. His features, clearly and finely chiselled, bore the same impress of the refined and excessive sensibility, which, if not always caused by sorrow, is its unfailing precursor. With strangers, to whom he was indifferent, Caryl's face wore only a look of cold, almost proud reserve, but with those whom he loved and trusted, it resembled in its varying expression the ever-shifting lights and shadows that flitted over his native hills —too like his native hills in this—that the shadow was more frequent than the sunshine, and rested longer there. On the other side of Mrs. Grenfell walked her stepdaughter Helen, a girl of seventeen. She

would inherit a good fortune in right of her mother, when she came of age, and she was quite pretty enough for an heiress—that is to say, she was not pretty at all. She was rather sallow, and rather 'dumpy,' but with beautiful dark hair and eyes, and something timid, almost deprecating, in her manner, that disarmed all hostile rivalry in women, or all severity of criticism in men. It had been said that she was the destined bride of the heir of Fernleigh. But that was before Miss Fielding dawned on the horizon. Report had veered round since, and now declared that she was wooed, and would be won, by the new curate of Hartsknoll, Mr. Benson. Which report is true? Not the first, certainly, thought Mr. Fielding, as—his covert scrutiny still unrelaxing amid all his conventional smiles and courtesies—he watched the pink colour deepen sweetly on

Margaret's cheek as Mr. Fernleigh greeted her, and saw too, with inward satisfaction, that as the young man's thoughtful grey eyes met hers they softened beneath their long dark lashes; with that meaning which the young never fail to recognise, and which the old never forget. Momentary as was the glance, other eyes besides Mr. Fielding's had marked it, and not certainly with the same approval; for a scowl gathered on the sullen brow of Willoughby Evans, who still stood near Margaret, which did not escape his host's observation, although it was probably unnoticed by the others, amid their mutual salutations and in the movement that almost immediately followed towards the dining-room. In the moment of inevitable silence, when everybody was occupied with the soup, Mr. Fielding glanced complacently round the room. Everything was in

order. The dinner well cooked and well served, the table prettily set out, the guests friendly and cheerful. Here, as elsewhere at the Manor, nothing missing for comfort and elegance, but no vulgar profusion; no insolent parade of mere riches. Mr. Fielding seemed to be nearing the goal of his modest ambition. He had won a good footing on the lands of his ancestors. He had been well received by the blue blood of the county (there was not much of it in quantity, but it made up for that in quality, it was so *very* blue!). The head of his line, as he delighted to call Sir Loys, had given him a kinsman's welcome, and if soft looks and softer tones had any promise in them, before long he might call Caryl Fernleigh 'son,' and live to see his descendants. But ah! the Skeleton at the Feast! the skeleton of distrust and doubt represented at the pre-

sent moment by the sufficiently solid and life-like presence of the hateful Willoughby Evans; and as Mr. Fielding's eye dwelt upon him, again that frightful alternative rose before his mental vision. Margaret, robbed of her brilliant prestige of one of the richest heiresses in England, the comparatively dowerless bride of a man whose fortune was barely sufficient to support his rank, or the wife of that ill-tempered underbred coxcomb, and the future mother (Mr. Fielding's imagination took a wide range) not of Fernleighs of Fernleigh, but of Evanses; whose forefathers, if they had ever had any —(Mr. Fielding was inclined to deny them that privilege)—had been the Lord knows what, tailors or publicans or sinners, 'promiscuous;' and he hated his unconscious guest with a bitterness which, I fear, gave *him* an unquestionable claim to be numbered

in the latter class. And ever, while he chatted smilingly with his fair neighbour, the host directed furtive glances of malevolence at his *bête noiré*, and loathed him, and cursed Morton. There are some who hold that a 'good hater must be a good lover.' Not so; a thorough, persistent, vindictive hatred grows best, like clinging tetch and bindweed, in a poor and shallow soil. How can it be otherwise? Is not hatred fed by a mean and selfish insistence on our own rights, by prejudiced blindness to the possibility of merit in those we hate; and can such hatred be the growth of any noble nature? or can any nature remain noble that has long been subjected to such ungenerous influences, or long remain capable of the self-renouncing tenderness of love? But Mr. Fielding's nature, though not unworthy, was essentially feeble and superficial.

His loftiest ambition was to be a gentleman in appearance, in habits, in all the minutest surroundings of external life. Not the highest ideal perhaps, but yet a good one so far as it went, falling short of a nobler excellence, in that it aimed only at externals and had reference only to the approval of the world without. It would have been ungentlemanly to betray to Evans the dislike with which he regarded him, especially in his present relation to him as a guest. But the dislike grew the deeper and more spiteful for its enforced concealment, and made his presence at his table turn everything to gall and wormwood. The object of his aversion was at a disadvantage just now, for he was decidedly out of temper, and did not look amiable. He sat sullenly silent, scarcely addressing a word to little Helen Grenfell, who sat next him. His eyes were fixed

upon the table-cloth, and only occasionally lifted to shoot glances of no friendly import at Caryl Fernleigh, who appeared utterly unconscious or regardless of his disapproval. Nor did he gain by contrast with his rival. His figure, though powerful and well made, had a certain coarseness, which was the more apparent beside the intellectual dignity and refinement of the distinguished-looking and elegant Caryl; and a dim perception of this unpleasant truth deepened the secret discontent that lowered on his scowling brows.

'And so you have Meredith for your gamekeeper, Fielding?' said Sir James Blake, when the servants had retired. 'I saw his wife at the lodge gate as we drove by; how do you like him?'

'Well enough,' answered the merchant, 'he is civil and active, and I believe a good shot, and all that; but you know, Sir James,

that I am new as yet to my duties as a country gentleman, and confess that I am not much of a sportsman.'.

'We sportsmen are the more indebted to you for your disinterestedness in preserving the game for us—and Meredith is the terror of poachers. I wonder (turning to Caryl) that Sir Loys was willing to part with such an old servant, even to our good neighbour here.'

'It was Meredith's choice to leave my father's service,' answered Mr. Fernleigh; 'he is growing old, and the lighter duties of the situation here are as much as he can manage now.'

'I should have thought his duties would have been light enough with you, for Sir Loys seldom shoots now, and you never touch a gun.'

'But Collingwood shoots, when he is at home, and my father considers the preserva-

tion of game as quite one of the moral responsibilities of a landed proprietor.'

'And so it is, not a doubt of it,' exclaimed Sir James, warmly.

'I suppose, Mr. Fernleigh,' said Evans, addressing his rival for the first time, with some abruptness—'I suppose you go in for the demoralising influence of the game laws, and all that sort of thing?'

Caryl smiled slightly.

'By no means, Mr. Evans; I have no objection to preserve game for the amusement of my friends who like "sport." My dislike to it is purely personal.'

'Don't like to fire off a gun, perhaps? Gad, I've known men who were so nervous they couldn't fire off a cracker.'

'If you will force me to a public confession of my faith, or rather of my practice,' answered Caryl with unmoved serenity,

you will find it, Mr. Evans, in the lines of the poet, when he warns us

> Never to seek our pleasure or our pride
> In sorrow of the meanest thing that feels.'

'Do you ever relish a beefsteak?' sneered Willoughby.

'Yes, I do,' answered Fernleigh, 'but it does not follow that I should relish the work of the butcher who killed the ox that furnished it.'

'Ah,' said the clergyman, 'it is a matter of feeling entirely; your own peculiar idiosyncrasy, Mr. Fernleigh. I am glad you do not insist on the principle, as that might carry us too far. You see, these creatures are bred and reared by us for the amusement their destruction affords us. The power we thus exercise is but the fulfilment of the higher and universal law which makes death and

suffering the ultimate condition of the tenure of all created life.'

Caryl bowed in silence, but Margaret, who was looking at him, saw his forehead contract, as if with a spasm of inward anguish, and she hastened to change the subject.

'Sir James, what is the story about Meredith's son? Something that occurred at the Heath, I am told?'

'Have you never heard it, Miss Fielding? Then I am sure you don't gossip with your maid, as some young ladies do, or she would have spoken of it long ago. Caryl can tell you all about it, for he was a chief actor in it. Indeed, Caryl, I don't believe that old Meredith will ever forgive you that.'

'Some poaching adventure, was it not?' said Miss Benson. 'Oh, do tell us, Sir James, those stories are so exciting.'

'Well,' began Sir James, 'about two years

ago, Meredith's son entered my service as head keeper, and before he had been twelve months with me I received information that he was in league with a band of poachers that had long infested the neighbourhood, not only conniving at their depredations but actually sharing their profits.'

'Dear me,' said Mr. Benson, 'that's very bad; I should have hoped better things from the son of such a respectable man as George Meredith.'

'Respectable servants,' rejoined Sir James, 'like other respectable people, have scampish sons sometimes. The lad had been spoiled by his father's indulgence. Old Meredith was always a fool about his boys.'

'You punished him, of course?'

'I only punished him by dismissal. He was cashiered, without a character, and Parr, the underkeeper, promoted to his situation.

Naturally, Jem Meredith believed that Parr had been the informer against him, and threatened dire revenge.'

'I wonder,' said Margaret, 'that Parr would venture to take the place.'

'Oh! gamekeepers always incur some risks, and Parr fancied that Meredith's menaces were too noisy to be really dangerous.'

'He was mistaken, was he not?'

'Yes; unfortunately for him, Meredith the younger was as determined a ruffian as any in the county, and detection and exposure had made him quite reckless. Shortly after Parr's engagement I received an anonymous letter, saying that on a certain night, at a certain hour, a powerful band of armed men would waylay my keeper in the wood, and warning me to take measures for his protection. Come, Fernleigh, do you take up the

story; these ladies will be more interested in it when you tell it than in listening to an old fellow like me.' And Sir James had recourse to the claret jug for refreshment.

Caryl laughed and obeyed.

'Sir James, on receipt of the letter, immediately rode over to Fernleigh, where my brother chanced to be entertaining a party of college chums. It was arranged that we, and some others of the young men in the neighbourhood, should assemble quietly at Heath House on the morning of the day named, and endeavour to surprise and capture the intending assailants of Parr.'

'Not an appointment much to your taste, I fancy?' remarked Evans, with as near an approach to an insolent sneer as he dared venture.

But Caryl smiled good-humouredly.

'No,' he replied, 'my habits are not very

warlike; still a man will do violence to his usual habits to prevent an honest fellow from being savagely beaten by a band of ruffians, for doing his duty to his employer.'

'But you did not prevent it, after all?'

'Unhappily, no. The fellows either got scent of our design and altered their plans, or the letter itself was a stratagem to keep us from interference until too late. It named twelve as the hour at which Parr was to be decoyed into the wood, by a shot or two fired near his cottage; and at nine, before we had sallied forth from Heath House, one of our watchers came to say that he had heard a shot fired in a different direction, in the preserves, and the voices of men in altercation. We all rushed to the spot indicated, but arrived too late. Poor Parr lay stretched on the ground, with his gun, recently discharged, beside him.'

Caryl stopped, and shuddered.

'Ah,' said Sir James, 'we saw at once that there could be little life left in him. He was beaten and bruised to a jelly. However, some of our party raced off for a doctor, and the rest dispersed about the wood, in search of the scoundrelly assailants; and we left our friend Fernleigh, here, to watch by the wounded man, with my blood-hound Gelert to take care of *him*.'

'Fine care, Gelert took!' said Caryl with a laugh. 'I was watching anxiously for my friend's return with aid for the poor sufferer, when my attention was attracted to the movements of the animal, which was sniffing and whimpering eagerly round a tree close at hand, and on looking up to it I saw the shining barrel of a gun glance in the moonlight, from among the branches.'

'Pleasant for you,' remarked Evans, 'and

I suppose there would have been little use in *running away*?'

'Not much, I should say,' answered Caryl coldly, for the insolence of the speaker's manner could not be unnoticed; 'however, he dared not fire, for fear of summoning my associates to the spot; but, perceiving himself detected, he gave a low whistle, to awaken the dog's recognition of him, and then slipped swiftly down the tree into my very arms.'

'And then—' began Evans, but a look of indignant remonstrance from Margaret stopped him.

'Then indeed,' continued Caryl smiling, for he, too, had seen Margaret's look, 'then indeed came the tug of war. How it would have ended I cannot say, but that Sir James's faithful Gelert, whom he had left to "take care" of *me*, at a sign from the ex-

keeper suddenly sprang at me and pulled me down, but not before the crape mask which the ruffian wore over his face had been torn to pieces in the struggle, enabling me, by the light of the full moon, to recognise the features of James Meredith.'

'He escaped?'

'Yes,' said Sir James, 'he escaped; and when we returned, we found poor Parr as dead as a doornail, and Caryl more than half strangled in the fangs of that brute Gelert, whom I would have hanged the next day if Fernleigh had not begged so hard for his life.'

'Nay,' laughed Caryl, 'I was only too grateful to him that he had not torn me to pieces, as Meredith doubtless would have wished him to do.'

'And you never caught Meredith?'

'Never; he has eluded the efforts of the

police to capture him up to this day; but they are on his trail, and will have him soon, and, then, Caryl, your evidence will finish him—the blackguard!'

Again Margaret fancied that Fernleigh turned a little pale, and at the same moment her father gave her a significant look, in obedience to which she rose, and withdrew with the ladies to the drawing-room.

CHAPTER VI.

IN THE DRAWING-ROOM.

Ah, now,
I see it clearly, there's some smooth-tongued knave
Has been before me. PHILIP VAN ARTEVELDE.

THE little party withdrawn from the dining-room was about as dreary and flat as such an elimination usually is. Lady Blake, Sir James's young wife, was what is invidiously styled by ladies 'quite a gentleman's beauty,' and fully conscious, both of the distinction and of the disparagement it implies, on the part of her own sex, she was seldom at any pains to conciliate them, or to deprecate

their jealousy. Her 'love of approbation,' however strongly developed, had reference to the masculine genus alone, and when none of that were present she did not waste her time or her resources in any endeavour to shine. She stood now, languidly leaning against a marble console table, pretending to examine some beautiful china upon it, but in reality she was 'practising attitude' in the mirror opposite. Helen Grenfell had established her stepmother in a comfortable easy chair, amply cushioned—though to look at Mrs. Grenfell, one would have thought nature had sufficiently provided her with those luxuries. Beside her sat Miss Benson, a shrewd little woman, who having made certain calculations concerning the advantages of a union between her brother and the young heiress at the Park, had placed herself

beside Mrs. Grenfell, with the intention of gathering from her some information that could be utilised to the furtherance of that union. 'Aunt Flo' was not used to a patient, deferential listener; and she prepared to make the most of the advantage, after her own peculiar fashion.

'My dear,' she began, leaning forward on her cushions, and moving a plump hand with a slow rotatory motion over her rheumatic knee, 'I am so sorry that I have done so little to make your visit to Hartsknoll pleasant for you (Miss Benson was on the point of returning home), but you see, Helen has been away, and Sir Loys is ill with gout, and I am such a martyr to rheumatism I seldom go anywhere, except on an occasion like the present, when it would have been unkind to refuse.'

'Then you do not chaperone Miss Grenfell

everywhere?' asked Miss Benson, thinking to herself that in that case she might venture to invite the younger lady to visit her.

'The idea!' answered Mrs. Grenfell.

This, by the way, was a favourite exclamation of hers; and Sir Loys, from whom his sister would take any amount of good-natured banter, used to say that she was always in search of the great central idea, as wandering comets were said to be seeking their centre, in space. With much the same result, apparently, for Aunt Flo never seemed to find her 'idea,' nor any other instead of it.

'You see,' she resumed, 'that poor Helen could never go out if she could only go with me, but Lady Blake generally takes her, and then there is Miss Fielding, who has no one to chaperone *her* but her father.

Are not they charming people, our new neighbours; they are relations of ours, you know. Indeed, Miss Fielding has quite the Fernleigh face; she is very like what I was at her age.'

Miss Benson was not sufficiently familiar with the 'Fernleigh face' to trace its characteristics so readily, but as she glanced at Margaret's slight figure, and the bird-like lightness and precision of her movements, she marvelled, if Mrs. Grenfell had ever resembled *her*, by what principle of expansion she could so far have outgrown the likeness.

'How nice they have everything here,' pursued the good-natured guest. 'I am sure Mr. Fielding has a French cook; wasn't that a delicious *vol au ventre*?'

One of Mrs. Grenfell's little peculiarities was, that she could seldom attain to the right pronunciation of any unaccustomed

word, either in French or English, but Miss Benson being no French scholar, did not detect her companion's little error, and simply answered that she did not know what a *vol au ventre* was.

'The idea! you took some—that lovely puffy pie thing with the white insides. I am sure it was made by a French cook, and Mr. Fielding is rich enough to keep one. They say that Miss Fielding will be the sole heiress of Mr. Morton, who has *millions* to leave her.'

'Indeed?' said Miss Benson, with awakened interest, 'I was not aware that there were *two* heiresses present. I have heard that Miss Grenfell is one.'

'Yes,' answered Mrs. Grenfell, 'my Helen will be rich, too—but she ——'

'But she?' repeated Miss Benson interrogatively.

But Aunt Flo had wandered away after her 'idea.'

'Isn't it odd?' she asked, pensively 'that the Fernleigh men always marry heiresses?'

Miss Benson's heart sank suddenly, but rose again as she recollected Caryl's attentions to his young hostess.

'Because,' continued her friend, 'they never have any money themselves, and yet they always marry rich women—it's like a special providence!'

Miss Benson thought, but did not say, that a connection might possibly be traced between these facts without any reference to a special providence. Mrs. Grenfell rambled on.

'The idea of my having brought an heiress into the world, too! (into the family, I mean), for I had nothing when I married Mr. Grenfell. He left me all he could, but

Helen's fortune was her mother's, and it is strictly settled on her.'

'But if she marries?' dear Mrs. Grenfell; and Miss Benson drew her chair nearer to her friend, and opened her ears for a confidence.

'If she marries,' said Mrs. Grenfell serenely, 'all her money will go away!'

Miss Benson was horrified.

'If she marries?'

'A Fernleigh,' said Aunt Flo; and Miss Benson revived.

'Dear me! she is forbidden then to marry a Fernleigh?'

'No, indeed!' cried the other, indignantly, 'why should she be forbidden to marry who she likes?'

'You said if she married a Fernleigh her money would go away.'

'Of course it would—the Fernleighs al-

ways marry heiresses, and the money always goes away?'

'Goes *where*?' enquired Miss Benson, impatiently.

To which Aunt Flo blankly responded, '*I haven't an idea!*'

Meanwhile, Helen was eager to engage her new friend in a girlish tête-à-tête.

'What a lovely conservatory you have made, dear Miss Fielding. May I go into it?'

'Certainly; will you come, Lady Blake?'

But that lady declined. In her eyes a conservatory was a convenience for flirtation. Nothing, if not that. But she desisted from her self-contemplation, and sat down beside Mrs. Grenfell and Miss Benson, and went through the form of joining in their conversation. Though her part consisted in occasionally drawing her upper lip from her teeth, in a sort of dog's smile, varying

this vivacious gesture by nibbling the inside of her cheek, so as to display, without the exertion of smiling, a pretty dimple that she could make very effective when she thought it worth while. Margaret conducted her youthful guest into the fragrant retreat.

'I am so glad you are fond of flowers, Miss Fielding; you might find the country dull without some such resource, and tire of us all, and we are so anxious to keep you among us,' said the little maiden, with some emphasis, and flushing slightly as she spoke.

Margaret smiled.

'I am sure,' she answered, 'that I shall not tire of the country. I have been used to a retired, almost a secluded life; but to tell truth, I do not know much about flowers, though of course I like them, they are so beautiful.'

'You will soon learn all about them.

Mamma's whole interest is in her garden, and Caryl will teach you; he is as fond of flowers as mamma is.'

This time a faint flush rose to Margaret's cheek.

'You are very fond of Mr. Fernleigh?' she enquired, abruptly.

'Oh! yes, dearly fond of him; of them all, they are so good to me. They have always treated me as a daughter of the house.'

'Report says,' observed Margaret, 'that one day you will be *really* a daughter to Sir Loys?'

If Miss Fielding had blushed just now, she had her revenge, for the crimson that mounted to Helen's forehead shamed the hue of the camellia that blossomed near her, as she faltered confusedly:

'People spread such foolish reports in

country places. The Fernleigh young men are like brothers to me.'

'But,' persisted Margaret, 'the world is so slow to recognise the fraternal element, in the affection you own that you do "dearly" feel for Mr. Caryl Fernleigh.'

Helen's embarrassment disappeared at once, and she looked up, laughing, into Margaret's eyes.

'For Caryl?' she repeated, 'did you hear that I was engaged to Caryl? How absurd! *You* know better than that!'

Well, yes, Margaret *had* fancied that she knew better, but she was not sorry to hear an authoritative disclaimer from Miss Grenfell; and she drew her own private inference from the fact that Miss Helen's confusion had nothing to do with the *elder* of the two Fernleigh brothers.

'We deserve,' she said, smiling, 'the

taunt that is so often cast at young girls like us, that they cannot be together for five minutes without talking of love and lovers. See, Fletcher is bringing in coffee; let us go back into the drawing-room.'

'But,' pleaded Helen, 'I may come, on mornings, and have long chats with you, when there is no one with you? We ought to be close friends, as I hope we shall be.'

Margaret did not belong to the 'gushing' school of young ladies, and her training, even more than her nature, had made her undemonstrative. She looked down with a little contempt on the suppliant for her friendship; but in the soft eyes that met hers there was such an innocent earnestness, that she could not reject the appeal, so she replied, rather patronisingly:

'Yes, we will be close friends call each

other "Helen" and "Margaret," and tell each other all our secrets; only I warn you that my confidences will not be many, for I am not at all sentimental. Indeed!' she added, loftily, 'I have been taught not to trust much to feelings. Life has duties far more important than mere feelings.'

'Yes, but Miss Marston says that at our age—yours and mine—feeling is the soil in which duty strikes its first and deepest roots.'

'Miss Marston? Is she your governess?'

But before Helen could answer, the gentlemen made their appearance, and the girls rejoined the rest of the company. Presently Helen, who was an accomplished musician, was led to the piano by Mr. Benson, and Mr. Fernleigh contrived to find himself again beside Miss Fielding. They were a little isolated from the others.

Sir James Blake was talking with great animation to Miss Benson about a fire that had lately consumed all his farm buildings, and Miss Benson listened complacently, while she watched what she hoped was an incipient flirtation between her brother and the Fernleigh heiress. Mr. Fielding bent over Mrs. Grenfell's chair, listening with bland smiling courtesy to reminiscences of life in Italy, in which 'Florence the Fair' especially delighted to indulge. As for Willoughby Evans, he stood near the door, watching his rival's gradual approach to the lady of the house, while Lady Blake scrutinised him through her eye-glass with an intentness of curiosity with which she would certainly not have honoured him, if he had not been a species of novelty in her social experience. But Evans would not have observed her though she had stared at him

through a telescope, and was in the act of crossing the room, with the amiable intention of making himself as disagreeable as possible, to Mr. Fernleigh, when Lady Blake suddenly called him to her side, and affecting to believe that all gentlemen were skilful geometricians, invited him to teach her to put together a very intricate Indian puzzle that she made him bring her from a table. Her intention of detaining him beside her was too evident for Willoughby to resist, and at another time he would have been flattered by it, but now his only feeling was resentment at being compelled to witness Mr. Fernleigh's advances to his beloved, without the power of interrupting and embittering them. His scowl grew darker and darker, while Lady Blake played off (mainly for wholesome exercise) all her artillery of glances, dimples, and grins. She could not

understand his impassibility, and commented upon it to her husband as they drove home, in a tone of languid disgust.

'Whence on earth did the Fieldings import that black-whiskered enormity, who was so rude to Caryl Fernleigh at dinner? I tried to make him out, but I never saw such a bear out of the Zoological Gardens!'

Evans' ill-humour would not have been improved if he could have overheard the dialogue between Margaret and Fernleigh.

'My father,' Caryl was saying, 'charged me to tell you how disappointed he was that he could not do homage to you, on this your first birthday among us; but I have been too selfishly absorbed in my own happiness in being near you to remember the regrets of those less favoured.'

The caressing words were made still more so by the soft inflections of a singularly

rich and melodious voice; and had any handsome young man so addressed most girls of Margaret's age; downcast eyes and deepening blushes would have made significant response. But Margaret was unlike most young girls, and though a faintly rising colour betrayed an inward consciousness that she would fain have concealed, she answered with no shade of bashful timidity in her manner, and no more of girlish coquetry than if she had been sixty years old:

'Sir Loys is very kind. You have all been most kind in your welcome of papa and me. Such entire strangers as we came among you.'

'Nay,' said Caryl, smiling; 'you forget we are relatives.'

'Such very distant relatives, it is an additional kindness in you to acknowledge it.'

'And since it is acknowledged, I am going to presume on it, to make you a petition.'

'A petition?'

'That you will allow me to join you and Mr. Fielding in your ride to-morrow to Briarsdale?'

'How did you know that we intended riding to Briarsdale?'

'That is no mystery. I heard Mr. Fielding tell Sir James Blake that he was going to take you there to-morrow, to see a horse that he thought of purchasing for you.'

'Then why did you not ask papa's permission to join us?'

'Because that permission from you would have a tenfold value.'

'You have not always stood on such ceremony.'

'No, but I graduate my pleasures. I

am happy when I see you pass, with a smile, or a little wave of the hand; I am happier when I can venture to join you; happiest of all when I do so by your expressed consent.'

'And if I invited you,' said Margaret, laughing.

'Oh, I have never yet dared to aspire so high as that.'

'I invite you now,' she said, politely; 'and shall be very pleased if you will bring Miss Grenfell with you. Whereabouts is Briarsdale?'

'It is a farmhouse, about five miles beyond Fernleigh, the other side of the wood.'

'*Beyond* Fernleigh? Then we had better ride to meet you. We will be at the Old Chase at eleven. If you are not there, we will go on towards the Park. Mr. Evans

will be with us too, as he is on a visit to papa.'

At which last piece of information, Mr. Fernleigh did not look enthusiastically charmed.

CHAPTER VII.

WILLOUGHBY FORGETS HIMSELF.

This is a spray the bird clung to,
Making it blossom with pleasure,
Ere the high tree-top she sprung to,
Fit for her nest and her treasure.

R. BROWNING.

MARGARET was not compelled to keep her assignation with Evans in the conservatory, at the risk of being overheard and overlooked by the housemaid, when she came in to 'do' the drawing-room. The morning was bright and sunny, with a slight hoar frost, and Miss Fielding, who was always an early riser, descended into the garden

scarcely earlier than her usual wont, and found Mr. Evans contemplating the china roses that flowered below the old-fashioned terrace walk. She was not at all conscious that in giving him this meeting she was doing anything that could be open to blame or misrepresentation. She knew very little of the world, or of the usages of 'society.' Her grandmother's rule, though strict as regarded method and discipline, had left her much freedom in thought and action. Possibly Lady Tolmaine had seen the ill effect of too severe restraint, in the case of her own daughter. Perhaps she recognised in the higher spirit and bolder intellect of her grandchild a nature more akin to her own, and reposed in her a fuller confidence. No young men visited at Lady Tolmaine's, and Margaret was thought too young to 'go out.' Willoughby Evans alone came occasionally,

on pretext of business; and the old lady, with the strange indiscretion that sensible people sometimes betray, had not only permitted her grand-daughter to hold frequent, almost familiar, conversations with him about the books that he volunteered to lend her, but even to correspond with him on their subjects. To be sure, it was understood that the letters on both sides were to be submitted to her perusal; but when illness made her incapable of such supervision, Evans took care not to surrender the advantage he had gained, and was ever on the watch to improve it. At length Margaret became annoyed at the tone he had gradually given to his letters, and having discontinued the correspondence, was now anxious to abolish all record of it. Still, she had but a vague sense of having been imprudent, and was quite unaware that her present proceeding

was more imprudent yet. Like most women when they have an object to gain, her attention was too intently fixed upon her end, to weigh the disproportion of the means she employed to attain it. As for Willoughby, he was fully aware that all his chances of winning the heiress were staked on the success of this interview. She had already declined writing to him; it was much that she had not betrayed him to her father, but if he failed to make the desired impression now, she would doubtless do so to get rid of him, and he would be summarily expelled from the Manor House. How was it that he was so nearly checkmated now, when at one time the game had seemed almost in his own hands? He had crept, very cautiously, into the old lady's intimacy by a respectfully deferential, though not servile, compliance with her tastes and

prejudices. He had won the young girl's confidence by a feigned sympathy with the intellectual aspirations which at her age, and in characters like hers, are vague, and eager for direction and guidance; and Evans' education, showy and superficial, wore to an inexperienced eye an appearance of depth and solidity to which it had no real claim. He was good-looking, too; nobody ever denied that; and yet, as he stood waiting for the lady, he felt that he had lost, or nearly lost, all the chances of success he had ever had. He thought that his failure had arisen from over-caution, that he should have declared himself sooner, flung off the mask of friendship, and taken the citadel by storm. Perhaps it was not yet too late to repair the error. With all her coldness and prudery, she had no objection to being made love to, or she would not have given

him this meeting. And the young man's vanity whispered reassuringly, that even yet she might be won, by a proper display of passionate ardour. There, in truth, lay Willoughby's greatest difficulty, although he was unaware of it. He never, at any time, could have seriously influenced Margaret's affections, because he had never really loved her. She was not the sort of woman who could have had any fascination for him. Her sole attraction in his eyes was the certainty that she would inherit Lady Tolmaine's fortune, and the probability that she would succeed to Mr. Morton's 'millions.' *Les beaux yeux de sa cassette* had been the sole beacon light that had allured, and was alluring him—ah, whither? And Margaret, whose pride it was to rise superior to the silly sentimentalism of most girls, yet instinctively detected the false ring of Evans'

professions, and fancied that it was the sentiment itself that she scorned, while it was only its insincerity.

All the time Mr. Evans had been in the garden, he had been improvising impassioned speeches to make when the young lady should appear; but they died on his lips when she came towards him, looking very pretty and elegant in her fresh morning *négligée*, but as provokingly cool as the rosebuds that the early frost had silvered. So he could only clasp close the hand she held out to him, and fix his great black eyes on hers with what he meant for an ardently tender gaze, while he meditated how he had best begin. But it was Margaret who began.

'Now, Mr. Evans, I am here at your request, to listen to the explanation you wished to give. Please don't be long mak-

ing it, for breakfast will be ready at nine, and papa likes me to be in the breakfast-room before him.'

The address was not reassuring, and the manner of it even less so, and Willoughby's real feelings were so little in accordance with those he intended to express that, to tell truth, he would have liked to give Miss Fielding what nurses call 'a good slap.' But he answered, blandly:

'First of all, Miss Margaret, tell me how I have been so unhappy as to offend you?'

'I am not offended.'

'But you are displeased—you admitted that, last night, when you said that you had "withdrawn" your correspondence from me.'

'I do not wish to recur to that subject; you know—you have always known—that

our correspondence would be impossible now that I have returned to my father's authority. He would disapprove of it. Grandmamma only permitted it because she looked on me as a child—and it *was* very childish. Give me back my letters, please, and let the folly be forgotten.'

Evans' face darkened.

'It was folly and sport to *you*, Miss Margaret; it was ruin and death to *me*.'

'It was not death, since you are alive still,' replied the heartless damsel; 'and I can't see where the ruin lies, either.'

'I am utterly ruined, for I have no heart left to struggle for the means of an existence which, without your love, would be a living death. Yes, Margaret, your *love*—I am mad enough to ask for that; from your earliest girlhood it has been my dream of heaven. Scorn, if you will, my poverty,

my humble origin; I will say boldly with the poet:

Behold me! for I love thee; I am worthy as a king.'

'I don't dispute your worthiness,' replied Margaret, with exasperating composure, 'but I greatly dispute your wisdom in rhapsodising after this absurd fashion. If this is your promised explanation, I do not think it at all satisfactory—quite the reverse; so please fulfil the conditions of our agreement, and give me back my letters.'

'D—n your letters!' cried the infuriated suitor.

Certainly *that* was vulgar, and worse than vulgar, in Mr. Willoughby Evans; but then Margaret was so very aggravating! But she drew herself up with dignity, and said:

'You forget yourself, Mr. Evans; I must decline any further conversation with you.

We shall meet at breakfast.' And away she went, and marched majestically up the terrace steps.

But when she reached the top, the unhappy lover was again beside her.

'Forgive me, oh forgive me! Your cruel indifference maddened me.'

'I freely forgive you,' answered the young lady, with great sweetness. It is wonderful how mild and gentle a woman can be, when she has succeeded in thoroughly exasperating an ill-tempered man. 'But excuse me, I wish to be alone.'

Her companion hesitated, but it was evident that he could gain nothing by prolonging the interview while Miss Fielding was in her present humour, so, resuming his suspended good manners, he accepted his dismissal, and lifting his hat with a salutation that she formally returned, he

sullenly walked off towards the breakfast-room.

'It's best to be off with the old love before you are on with the new; eh, Margaret?' and Margaret, starting, turned round, to face her father.

He met her questioning look with an arch smile, but his voice was grave, as he continued:

'But, my child, you must study fitness of time and place when you wish to dismiss a lover, and not keep tryst with him at sunrise.'

'Have I done wrong, papa?' she asked; and the innocent *naïveté* of the question would have disarmed a more severe censor than Mr. Fielding. 'Then I will make atonement by frank confession; for indeed there must be no reserves between you and me. I want your entire trust, and I

must show you that I am not unworthy of it.'

She slid her arm through her father's, and leading him away from the house, proceeded to relate to him all that had passed between herself and the clerk, with all the circumstances of their previous acquaintance. When she had ended, her father thanked her warmly for her candour.

'But, my love,' he said, 'I do not see that anything can be gained by quarrelling with Evans. A young lady's name should not be in the power of a fellow like that, to breathe with disrespect. And I am particularly anxious not to break with him for the present, as my cousin Morton has such an absurd fancy for him. However, of course *you* must be protected from annoyance.'

'I can protect myself,' answered Margaret, loftily.

'No doubt of that, and for the present you had better do so in your own way. I will send Evans back to town in a day or two, and meanwhile you will oblige me by saying nothing to him of your conversation with me on the subject. In that way, I shall not be compelled to notice his insolence—you understand?'

Margaret did *not* understand very clearly, but she gave the required promise, and 'Temporising Tom' was satisfied.

CHAPTER VIII.

AT HER FEET.

But this gallant
Had witchcraft in't, he grew into his seat,
And to such wondrous doings brought his horse!

SHAKSPEARE.

THE meeting at the breakfast-table, after such exciting interviews, might be supposed to be rather trying, but it passed off very pleasantly. Margaret, calmed and strengthened by the consciousness of her father's sympathy, and relieved from the burthen of a degrading secret, felt for her rejected admirer as for one who had the odds so

much against him, that she could afford to be generous, and even compassionate. Moreover, Willoughby's manner, though it had still a shade of sullenness, was yet so far penitent and deprecating as to increase the haughty Margaret's disposition to forbearance. Mr. Fielding was quite in high spirits—it was such a comfort to find that, after all, there was no entanglement. Those letters were awkward, certainly—and he augured badly from their owner's evident intention to retain them. But at least Margaret's affections were free as regarded Morton's odious pet. He would be able to convince him of that; and then he could not have the excuse of furthering *her* wishes, by that most preposterous disposition of his wealth, and, soothed by these reflections, the merchant was tenderly courteous to his daughter, more affable than usual to Evans, and on the very

best terms with himself. Breakfast over, Margaret retired to don her riding-dress. The horses were at the door when she came down again, but Mr. Fielding was standing at the door reading a letter that had arrived late, as letters often did at Hartsknoll. He looked up, as his daughter approached him, with an anxious absent air.

'Ah, ready so soon, Margaret? You have been very quick in dressing—let me see.' He glanced irresolutely at Evans, then back at her, and hesitated. 'My love, I have letters of some importance to attend to. I fear our ride must be given up, unless—Would you mind my transferring you to Mr. Evans' charge? Mr. Fernleigh and Miss Grenfell, you told me, are to meet you on the other side the Old Chase.'

Margaret looked vexed, but when her eyes encountered the humble, imploring

glance of Evans, she suppressed her rising irritation, and answered quietly:

'I shall be delighted (what a story!) with Mr. Evans' escort, papa, if he doesn't mind riding Pathfinder, for there's no time to saddle another horse; and (glancing maliciously at Willoughby) Pathfinder does not like strange riders.'

But Evans was too enchanted at the unexpected opportunity of another tête-à-tête with the heiress to heed the warning intimation, not even though it was seconded by Mr. Fielding's caution, as he rode away:

'Take care of Pathfinder, Mr. Evans; be gentle with him, for he is very hot-tempered.'

A groom had been dispensed with on this occasion, as was the general rule when Mr. Fielding rode with his daughter, and as the merchant looked after them, he murmured:

'I wish I had sent Edward with them, or that Evans had had his horse. He rides like a cockney, as he is. Ah, my friend! you will have to practise a little more before you get a stud of your own. I hope he won't break Pathfinder's knees. If the horse breaks *his* neck it won't be of so much consequence!'

In happy unconsciousness of adverse criticism, Willoughby rode gaily on by his lady's side, with full purpose to make one last desperate effort to regain the place that he fondly flattered himself he had once held in her regard; and his first enquiry was:

'Where are we to be joined by Mr. Fernleigh, Miss Margaret?'

For being something of a calculating lover, he wished to know how long a time was allowed him, in which to 'make his game.'

'Three miles hence?' he repeated, when Margaret had answered his question. 'Well, we need not go fast, we have five miles further to go, and it is no use tiring the horses, is it?'

'Why,' laughed Miss Fielding, 'I do not think that five miles would tire Pathfinder or Flower of the Day much; but we must go slowly through the Old Chase, it is such a bad road.'

'So much the better, I shall have you to myself the longer. I wish the road would prove so bad that we should be forced to come the whole way back again.'

But Margaret chose to ignore this speech, and the tender look and accent that emphasised it.

'All roads will prove impassable to you,' she said, 'upon Pathfinder, if you fret him

as you are doing now. He is not a patient horse, and, excuse me, you are curbing him too tight; he has a very light mouth.'

An angry expression rose to Willoughby's lips, but he stifled it.

'Margaret,' he murmured, 'the time has been when you would not have tried to rob me of the few moments I can spend with you alone.'

'I hoped,' said Miss Fielding, drily, 'that when we parted this morning ——'

'When we parted, I was maddened by your indifference, and, I will confess it, by jealousy. I trusted that you had pardoned my—insolence.'

The word stuck in Evans' throat, and he brought it out with a spasmodic jerk, which, either by means of the bridle or through 'occult sympathy,' was communicated to

Pathfinder, who reared a lofty disapproval. Margaret glanced uneasily at the horse, and replied coldly:

'Let there be entire oblivion of the past—of *all* the past.'

'Let the past go then, but give me a fresh hope for the future. The deep passion of my soul breaks through the artificial restraints you would impose upon it, and even at the risk of displeasing you, I must give a loose to ——'

'The rein, please, Mr. Evans,' suggested the unsentimental listener, 'do loose the rein a little, or Pathfinder will rear and throw you—see how restless he is.'

And in fact Pathfinder, losing patience with his inexperienced rider, was beginning to make sundry demonstrations which threatened to grace Willoughby's eloquence with a forcible 'delivery' of his own. But

Mr. Evans' feelings—or his temper, which he chose to call his feelings, were getting excited as well as Pathfinder's, and he disregarded the warning.

'At least, Margaret,' he said, 'let me not have the bitter pain of believing myself *supplanted*—that the acquaintance of a few weeks is the successful rival of one who has worshipped you for years. You are angry. Oh, do not turn from me.'

She had no occasion, for at that moment Pathfinder commenced a rapid rotatory motion, which ended in his presenting both himself and his rider *en croupe*, under the nose of Flower of the Day, in a manner which, to say the least, was disrespectful; and on Evans' reining him round with a fierce wrench, both horses reared simultaneously, as if they were practising a minuet for the circus. Margaret became alarmed.

'For heaven's sake, Mr. Evans, do attend to your horse, or he will become unmanageable. Flower of the Day does not like it; it is well for you that the road—a deep sand—is so heavy, or they would both have run away with us before now.'

Willoughby did not immediately reply, being occupied in apologising to his horse; but as soon as Pathfinder had accepted the apology, and moved forward in a more direct line, he began again:

'Margaret, will you *never* love me?'

Miss Fielding raised her eyes and looked steadily at her importunate adorer. Mr. Evans had not chosen the 'situation' well. He was a bad horseman, and although he tried to meet Margaret's look with an imploring and impassioned glance, that expression struggled with the subdued irritation both against his horse and his companion,

and the bodily *malaise* caused by the jolting action of Pathfinder, who was trying to make himself disagreeable by moving along as if his legs had been tethered, over the rough deep ruts in the road. Mr. Evans neither looked nor felt his best; and so Margaret thought, as she dropped her eyes demurely, and replied:

'By persisting in this unseemly strain, Mr. Evans, you may diminish any regard I have ever felt for you; but you will certainly never increase it.'

That look alone would have been significant enough for most men, but Willoughby in his self-conceit misread it, and fancied that her hesitation arose from a secret admiration of him. 'She was drawing a comparison between me and that Fernleigh puppy,' he thought. 'I have touched her—a little more fervour.'

'You are not so heartless as you feign to be, Margaret; you will not condemn me to utter despair. I am at your mercy. I am at *your feet.*'

And so he was, and the horse too. Only the horse was on his knees, and the rider was on his nose! for, forgetting the claims of Pathfinder on his attention, he had dropped the bridle to clasp his hands in dramatic style of appeal, and the horse chancing to stumble in one of the deep ruts aforesaid, and suddenly missing the curb that had hitherto fretted him, fell prone as Dagon on the threshold of the temple, depositing his rider more literally than he had at all intended 'at the feet' of his obdurate mistress. Fortunately for Willoughby, a keen sense of the ridiculous was not among Margaret's intellectual gifts; and he might even have been flattered by the

grave earnestness of her voice, as he arose from his enforced humiliation; but that her words were only:

'Oh! has he hurt his knees? Papa will be so vexed.'

No; the horse's knees were uninjured, for the same reason that the rider's neck was safe. The deep soft sand, wet from recent rains, had preserved both, and the only mark of Willoughby's disgrace was a tolerably correct impression of his features in the mud, which the sun will harden by-and-by, perhaps to become a subject of interest and curiosity to the geologists and antiquarians of a future era. But Pathfinder was not inclined to forgive the indignity to which he had been subjected, and when Evans attempted to remount him, his gyrations became so rapid and so persistent, that the discomfited cavalier was forced to give up

and muttering to himself, 'Such a cursed road—it is better to lead him over it,' he took the horse's bridle on his arm, and walked sullenly and silently at Margaret's side, Pathfinder following, with no further signs of rebellion than was testified by the disdainful sniff at his ear, by which he occasionally intimated his contemptuous sense of superiority. At the end of the Chase, and before Willoughby could remount, Caryl Fernleigh, without Miss Grenfell, and followed by a groom, rode rapidly up, and the dusty knees of Pathfinder and the soiled attire of his rider told their dreadful tale at once.

'You have had an accident?' he enquired, as he came forward; and then, feeling sorry for Evans' evident mortification, he added good-naturedly: 'That Old Chase road is vile, it would throw any horse. Pathfinder is a good park hack, but he is

not fit for our rough country by-lanes. Mr. Evans, will you change horses with my groom? You will not find Pathfinder a pleasant horse to ride, when he is out of temper.'

Willoughby growled out an ungracious refusal, and profited by Pathfinder's preoccupation with Caryl's horse to remount him. Then he addressed Miss Fielding:

'You have an escort now, you can dispense with mine? I have forgotten some very important business that I should have named to Mr. Fielding this morning, in time for the post.'

Possibly he cherished a vague hope that Miss Fielding would decline Mr. Fernleigh's sole escort, and that he could have the spiteful satisfaction of spoiling their ride. But he was disappointed. Margaret was delighted to get rid of him.

'Can you take charge of me?' she asked Caryl, 'or have you any engagement with Miss Grenfell, that has prevented her from coming?'

'Oh no!' answered Fernleigh, 'Sir Loys is a little unwell to-day, and Helen has stayed to read the papers to him. I am quite at your service.'

'Good-by, then, Mr. Evans; please tell papa that Mr. Fernleigh will see me home safe.'

Willoughby made no reply. Pathfinder finding that he was to part company with Flower of the Day was beginning a fresh protest; but Evans, in no humour for any compromise in the presence of his rival, struck him so violent a blow that the horse reared, plunged, and dashed forwards with a frantic speed that promised to bring him to his stable-door *minus* his cavalier.

Margaret and Caryl looked after him in silence.

'He will be thrown,' remarked the latter, presently.

'Shall William follow him, and see that he arrives safely at the Manor?'

'Oh no!' said Miss Fielding placidly, 'he will not be thrown. Pathfinder will go quietly enough when he gets back into the sandy road of the Old Chase; never mind him!'

And neither she nor her new companion thought any more of him—for that day at least.

CHAPTER IX.

ADMIRING—SCENERY.

C'est toi que j'entends, que je vois:
Dans le désert, dans le nuage,
L'onde réfléchit ton image,
Le zéphyr m'apporte ta voix.

LAMARTINE.

CARYL FERNLEIGH was desperately in love with Miss Fielding—we may as well proclaim that fact at once. He loved her with the depth and fervour of a highly sensitive and imaginative nature, that sees in the object of its first affection the realisation of its holiest dreams of the beautiful and pure. And Margaret, did she love Caryl Fernleigh? She would have repelled such a charge with

scorn. She was certainly interested in the graceful youth, whose air of high breeding and intellectual refinement might have fascinated many young girls more accustomed to such attractions than Margaret had ever been. No woman, however inexperienced, could have been blind to the tender and delicate homage that his every gesture and look expressed. But Caryl had an enemy he dreamt not of, in Margaret's self-distrust, to which her pride gave the name of distrust of *him*. Her girlish imprudence with regard to Evans; the power it had given him to insult and annoy her, had humiliated her more than she would have been willing to admit even to herself. She had a secret, unexpressed, but most uneasy consciousness, that the time had been when her fancy had endowed the clerk with gifts and graces to which he had no real claim. Yet her

feeling for him had only been friendship; and if mere friendship could so mislead, how much more would passion. Like most intelligent and thoughtful girls, she was fond of the study of character, and fancied herself skilful in its analysis. The girl of nineteen, scarcely past the threshold of womanhood, knowing nothing of life but what she had read in poems or romances, written often by those who knew little more of it than herself, fancied that she could unravel the complex web of thought, feeling, and motive that make up the simplest human character! She had sketched for herself the plan of her own future, in which—for her preceptress had been wife and mother—love and marriage held a due importance. But not the blind devotion that silly sentimentalists call love. Nothing like that. She prided herself on being severely realistic.

Lady Tolmaine had recognised in her the dangerous gift of imagination, and warned her to watch against and repress it. And Margaret had determined that it should always be kept in the strictest subordination to reason and judgment. It had misled her a little, and only for a moment, with respect to Evans; but she was older and wiser now, and it should never betray her again.

Ah, Margaret! the cascade, bound fast in winter's ice-fetters, hangs mute and motionless from the rock, and the mountain lake that feeds it lies frozen and cold above; yet to the heart of the lake the volcanic springs, beneath and beyond it, are sending their unchilled currents. Listen; you may hear their murmur. And the ice gives way with a splinter and crash, and then comes the torrent-rush of the liberated waters, and the headlong sweep of the fall!

But strong in her self-confidence, Margaret feared no danger; and she rode on chatting her gayest, smiling her brightest, on the ensnared and unresisting Caryl. Poor Caryl! he was no stranger to gloom and sadness—but to-day they were to him as though they had never been, could never be again. The light of a young girl's eyes bathed all the universe in sunshine for him to-day. Every tint of nature was a glory, her every voice a song!

Away they went, through woodland glades, amid whose emerald-lighted aisles flashed splendid surprises of crimson and gold from changing chestnut and maple; through quiet, dreamy valleys, lulled by the low ripple of silver brooklets, or the drip of miniature cascades from weir and mill; through rifled hazel copses, where long brambles caught Margaret by the riding-skirt and held up to

her notice the 'small white rose' still flowering among their thorns, or the ebony fruit that still looked tempting, although the country people say that the devil waves his rod over blackberries at Michaelmas. Then they toiled up a winding mountain path, where the regal magnificence of gorse and heather yet glittered here and there, in sheltered nooks; and at length they emerged on a wide barren upland, where the horses sank up to their fetlocks in whin-bushes and stagshorn moss; and Margaret drew bridle, and halted to look around her.

The scenery, though so near the Manor House, was new to her, who had as yet stirred but seldom beyond the boundary of her newly-acquired home, and she looked with enchantment on the beautiful hills that rose tier on tier around her. Some were richly wooded, others swept upwards in a

smooth expanse of velvety green, varied now and then by grey stone quarries, fringed with larch and pine. A delicious valley lay at their feet, girdled by the river like a silver braid, and all melting away into the blue distance in a soft shining haze.

Margaret gazed on the landscape, and Mr. Fernleigh gazed on *her*. She looked very pretty to-day. Less enamoured eyes than Caryl's would have discerned *that*. The riding-dress displayed to advantage the beauty of her figure. The lithe slender waist, the graceful bust, the wide shoulders, a *little* more square perhaps than a critical observer would commend, but with a resolution and power about them that was not, especially in an Amazon, destructive of feminine charm. Her cheek glowed so brightly with the keen bracing air. Her brown eyes sparkled so brilliantly, and the

braids of her rich hair fell in such gorgeous masses round her slender white throat, that as Caryl looked at her, he thought of 'Queen Guinevere,' and his soul echoed the wish:

> A man had given his worldly bliss,
> And every other hope for this—
> To waste his whole soul in one kiss
> Upon those perfect lips.

And Margaret turned suddenly from the landscape, and surprised that impassioned glance, as if the soul, blazing forth from his eyes, had been caught in the fact before it had had time to withdraw into its inner shrine. The flush deepened slightly on her cheek, and she looked down, as most girls of nineteen would have done; but the next minute she looked up, as few girls would do, clear and straight into the young man's face, with an almost defiant look, as if she scorned and would disown her momentary bashfulness, and dared him to draw any

hope from it. Then Caryl's eyes fell with a deprecating air, and he did not see the little smile of triumph that curled his companion's pretty lips, nor the slight toss of her head that boded mischief, seeming to say, 'You are in my power, but I will never be in yours.' Imprudent Caryl! you have made a 'revoke,' and the forfeit will surely be exacted of you. Almost all women are either tyrants or slaves, and some are the more imperious in tyranny from a dread of the alternative to which a determined revolt of their subjects would reduce them.

After this silent passage of arms, Miss Fielding rode on victoriously, looking and feeling quite placid; but Caryl's heart still heaved with the ground swell of the scarcely subsiding tempest, and it was with difficulty that he checked the burning words that hovered on his lips, to substitute for them

the calm *banalités* of ordinary conversation. But, doubtful of Margaret's feeling for him, he was too delicate and chivalrous to avail himself of the situation, as Evans had done, to compel her to listen to a suit that might be disagreeable to her. Besides, although a *flirtation* may be pleasant enough on horseback, there are inconveniences attending the position for a serious proposal. The horse is *de trop* in the arrangement, so is the groom who rides behind you, or the nervous excitement of the riders may, mesmerically, or otherwise, communicate itself to the steeds, whereby the gentleman may be unwillingly forced to assume the character of the faithless knight, who 'loved and who rode away;' or the lady herself may seem to enact the part of the heroine, in the boisterous courtship of the Tartar Bride!

'I wonder,' remarked Margaret after

short pause, 'whether a taste for natural beauty is susceptible like other tastes, of cultivation and development? I can admire Nature already, but she seems strange to me as yet. I need, I think, a closer intimacy; a deeper teaching, fully to understand and *love* her.'

'Ah! let *me* be your teacher,' answered Caryl with earnest feeling. 'Who should be so able for the task as I? I, to whom Nature's holy and solemn sweetness has been strength in hours of weakness, courage and calm in such desponding struggles as I trust in God *you* will never know. Oh, Margaret! let *me* be your teacher.'

The low rich music of Caryl's exquisite voice vibrated through Margaret's frame with a thrill of strange emotion, and she made no reply. Emboldened by her silence, the young man bent forward to look into

her face. There was none of the bashful avoidance that lovers like to see, but her eyes met his with a sweet serious gravity. Caryl's horse had drawn much nearer to his companion than the width of the road required. Young men's horses have that trick, when pretty young women ride beside them. The curb rein, carelessly held, had dropped from Miss Fielding's regardless hold. Caryl restored it to her, and in doing so his touch rested longer than was strictly necessary on the delicate white-gloved hand—but Margaret did not frown. Then he recollected himself (and the groom behind), and drew aside a little; and there was another silence, which Margaret was again the first to break.

'How far are we now from Briarsdale?'

'From Briarsdale—it is not in this direction at all. Do you wish to go to Briarsdale?'

'I came out with that intention, certainly, and I thought you were taking me there.'

'I beg your pardon,' said Caryl, looking, I am afraid, much more penitence than he felt. 'I had quite forgotten Briarsdale, and have been showing you the best points of scenery only. We have made a circuit, and are not now very far from Fernleigh Park. It lies on the other side of yonder hill.'

'Then, for the last half-hour we have been riding *away* from Briarsdale?'

'I confess it, and towards the Park ——'

'Then you are taking me home?'

'Yes, to *my* home—(and he lingered on that word)—and, at Helen's entreaty, I am taking you to her. Will you go with me to my home, Miss Fielding?'

His eyes gave significance to the request, but his companion replied with the very unsentimental question:

'What o'clock is it?' and Caryl's high-strung feelings did not prevent him from making the equally unsentimental re-joinder:

'It is two o'clock—time for lunch. Helen and Aunt Florence are expecting you—in fact I promised to bring you—and I am at your commands to escort you back to the Manor, afterwards, at any hour you choose.'

Margaret consented without reluctance; she was glad to escape the possibility of another of Mr. Evans' 'explanations;' and they slowly descended into the valley, and presently entered a wood that wound round the hill, and circled in its loving embrace the lands of Fernleigh Manor and Park.

'Oh, Mr. Fernleigh, what a romantic cottage! Who lives there?'

It was a tiny cottage, built in the very

heart of the wood, but with a well-cleared avenue by way of road to it, and a bright little garden, filled with choice and carefully-tended flowers. 'Is it a gamekeeper's? but no, it is too refined—it has no look about it of dogs and guns.'

'It was originally built for a gamekeeper,' replied Caryl, 'but it is the residence of a lady now. Queen Mab lives there.'

'What can you mean?'—and Caryl laughed at the curiosity with which she looked at the cottage, where no living thing was visible—'Who is Queen Mab? and why does she live in such a lonely place? and is she a friend of yours, and why don't I know her?'

'She is my dearest, my very dearest, friend; you will know her soon, I hope. She does not mind living in a lonely place—and it is not so lonely as it seems. This ride

strikes into the great avenue of Fernleigh Park ——'

At that moment a man in the dress of a gamekeeper emerged from the Coppice, and advanced towards them. Caryl reined up his horse.

'Ah, Meredith! you have been to the Park to look for me?'

'Yes, Mr. Fernleigh, I have been waiting for you there since twelve o'clock. May I speak a word to you, by the lady's leave?'

Caryl looked at his charge, and hesitated—

'Will you ride forward, Miss Fielding? I will follow you in a moment; I must speak a word with Meredith.'

Margaret preferred to wait, and moved away a little distance, when she drew up and waited while the conference proceeded. Her eyes, wandering at first carelessly towards the speakers, returned to them with

ncreasing interest, till at last they remained rivetted on them with surprise and curiosity. The man who conversed with Mr. Fernleigh was no stranger to her; she had often met him in the Coppice and in the Chase. Meredith had nothing in common with the broad-shouldered, athletic type of forester. He was about fifty years old, below the middle height, though his frame was active and well knit. His face was closely shaven, and had a ruddy autumnal tint, which contrasted well with a profusion of fine white hair. Margaret had often noticed the delicacy of his finely-cut features, a delicacy not unfrequent among the Solshire peasantry; but as she watched him now, she was struck by the subdued ferocity of his look, and the almost menacing expression of his clear blue eye, as it met the gentle compassionate glance of young Fernleigh. She was not

near enough at first to hear what they said, but Meredith by his gesture seemed to be urging Caryl to do something which he resolutely declined; and as in her interest she involuntarily drew nearer to them, she heard the latter say gently but firmly,

'It is impossible, Meredith; your son has made himself amenable to justice, and I have not the power if I had the will to save him.'

'A word from you to Sir James Blake would make him drop the prosecution, Mr. Fernleigh; you might do that much for me.'

'You forget, my poor fellow, that it is a criminal prosecution by the Crown. Sir James has nothing to do with it beyond signing the warrant against your son.'

'Keep back the police!' cried the father desperately; 'help me to ship him over to America; he'll do well enough there, yet,

for all that's come and gone. Oh! Mr. Fernleigh, you *owe me a life.*'

'Would to God I could cancel the debt,' answered Caryl sadly, 'but this I cannot do.'

'A gentleman can do what he likes,' said Meredith with a fierce sullenness; 'it is only poor folk such as we, who must suffer and abide. If my boy is caught, it's *you*, Mr. Fernleigh—*you* who will swear away his life.'

'I have no alternative,' said Caryl sadly, 'though I would almost as soon be the means of injuring my own brother as any son of yours.'.

'*Any* son?' repeated Meredith passionately, 'say *another* son, Mr. Fernleigh, and it's the only one I have; the only one *you* have left me! Well, well, the gentry who boast so much of their heirs to their fine estates don't reckon much of a poor man's only son

when he's heir to nothing; but I pray God that *you* may be left in your old age as you are leaving me, with ne'er a one to lay your head in your coffin!'

'The curse causeless shall not come,' answered Caryl; but Margaret saw that his very lips grew white. 'You are privileged to say what you will to me, Meredith. God help you, my poor fellow ——.'

He raised his hat reverently as he spoke, and backing his horse from the path on which the keeper remained standing, rejoined Margaret, and rode slowly on. Miss Fielding glanced back, and saw the forester walk rapidly back in the direction of the Manor.

'Can nothing be done for him?' she asked. 'He seems very rash and violent, but he is doubtless greatly excited by his son's danger.'

'He is rash and violent,' answered Caryl,

'and his sons are,—were,—more violent still. Young Meredith is thoroughly brutal and worthless; to turn such a ruffian loose on *any* society, because his father is an old servant of my family, would be to imitate the worst abuses of feudal times. Nor is it in my power, except by a wilful subversion of law and justice.'

He did not seem desirous of pursuing the subject, so Margaret said no more. In another moment they were in the wide chesnut avenue which led up to the house in Fernleigh Park. This avenue was the pride and glory of old Sir Loys' heart. He used to say that there were not three such avenues throughout England, and, indeed, there was not much else to be proud of at Fernleigh Park. The house itself was a wide low-browed edifice, built when architectural taste was at the lowest ebb, and its

chief merit consisted in its making no pretension to any. The original mansion, built, it was said, before the reign of the Tudors, had been destroyed by Cromwell's army, after a gallant but ineffectual resistance. Only one dilapidated tower remained standing, to mark the site of the old castle, a few yards only from the house, where its time-worn and moss-grown masonry in its dignified decay contrasted strangely with the square red brick abomination that stood beside it, looking like some vulgar bailiff, who has succeeded to his noble master's confiscated estates. The family legend related, how at the destruction of Fernleigh Castle, its owner had fled to the Continent, to join his exiled king. Returning with him, he had preferred the gaieties of courtly life to rural seclusion, and had left his heir no means of rebuilding his ancestral home.

For two generations, they had contented themselves with the old Manor House, as a residence sufficiently extensive for them in their fallen fortunes. The present house had been built by Sir Loys' great-great grandfather, who had married a wealthy lady, and hideous as was the structure, it had been costly enough to swallow up the greater part of the newly-acquired wealth, and leave the inheritors a little poorer than before. But to Sir Loys, easy and indolent, the architectural defects of his dwelling were no cause of disquietude. The chesnut avenue was there still, finer than ever it was —in full beauty now. It would last *his* time, and new trees were planted to keep it up for generations to come. And there stood the nobly ruined tower, to show that the Fernleighs of Fernleigh Chase had not always reigned over mere red brick houses with

white eyebrows. One day Caryl should marry an heiress, and pull down the ugly old mansion, and rebuild it in a style worthy of the ruined tower and the noble avenue. The old have their daydreams like the young; and, as Sir Loys saw from his dressing-room window the approach of the little cortège, he thought that the realisation of the first and most necessary part of his dream was near, so far as regarded the heiress. Helen saw the horsewoman, too, and hastened to the door to receive her.

CHAPTER X.

CONDITIONAL SURRENDER.

Oh, years may come, and years may bring
The truth that is not bliss,
But will they bring another thing
That can compare with this? A. CLOUGH.

'OH, you beautiful darling! how sweet of you to come!' And, so saying, Helen twined her arms round her friend's waist, and drew her across a low wide hall to a room called 'the study,' after a shower of kisses, to which the more undemonstrative Margaret rather submitted than responded, and which Caryl enviously watched, with

inward gnashing of teeth. In the study sat Mrs. Grenfell in a commodious easy-chair, beside a glowing wood fire, a piece of 'tatting' work in her fat white hands.

'My dear Miss Fielding, this is truly kind and neighbourly. We will dispense with ceremony, and be *en famille*, just as one is on the Continent—no stiff English formality. We dine early to-day; we always do when Sir Loys is in his room; you must stop, and we'll have a nice, sociable, gossiping tea, and Caryl will see you home in the evening.'

This was an unusually long and coherent speech for Mrs. Grenfell, and when she ceased, she lay back, panting and exhausted even more with the mental than the bodily exertion. Margaret entered a rather feeble protest.

'But papa will be anxious about me.'

'Oh!' said Helen, 'we will send John back

with your horse, and a message, and Caryl shall walk home with you across the Coppice; it will be a splendid starlight night; and Mr. Fielding has got Mr. Evans to keep him company at home.'

'True,' and as Margaret was by no means anxious to share in the latter advantage, she added, yet more faintly: 'But Sir Loys is confined to his room, and I shall be depriving him of your society?'

'Not at all, love,' said Aunt Flo, who had now recovered her suspended animation. 'Helen has been all the morning with my brother, and he is coming downstairs to join us in the evening. So go and take off your hat; dinner will be ready in five minutes, or lunch I suppose it is at this hour.'

'O certainly,' said Helen laughing, as she led her friend to her own room; 'it is more

polite to suppose that we shall not dine to-day than that we shall dine at such a barbarian hour as two.'

The girls, of course, returned to Helen's sanctum again after dinner, while Caryl went up to his father, and Aunt Flo took a siesta in the study, and Helen stood looking at her friend with admiration, as she readjusted her bright hair more elaborately than she had been able to do in her hurried toilet, when she first came in.

'How pretty you look in that habit! and, oh dear! (with a sigh) how I wish I were as pretty as you are!'

Margaret would have liked to answer 'so you are,' but as she glanced at the two figures reflected in the glass, she could not make that assertion, so she only asked:

'Why should you wish that, Helen?'

'Because—because a man who loves a

beautiful woman must be so glad, in contemplating her beauty; and it must be so delightful to be such a source of pleasure to one you love.'

'But, to the man who loves you, you will have a beauty of your own which no fairer face can have; a beauty which a sensible man can often discern in the plainest face.'

'Yes, he might,' replied Helen, naïvely, '*if he looked long enough.*'

Margaret laughed, and to change the subject, enquired:

'Tell me, dear, who lives in the pretty cottage in the wood, just before you strike into the chesnut avenue?'

'Oh, you mean Miss Marston's cottage? "Queen Mab," as we call her here.'

'*Miss* Marston?' repeated Margaret, 'is she young?'

'Yes—no—I don't know,' answered Helen,

absently. 'Oh, Margaret! has Caryl told you about Collingwood?'

'No; what about Collingwood?'

Margaret asked rather languidly; she wanted to hear more about Queen Mab.

'I forgot, he couldn't have told you, for the books and letters arrived after he had started to meet you. Sir Loys has sent for him to talk about it.'

'About the lateness of the letters?'

'No, no, about Collingwood's poem. It has just come out, and it is a *brilliant* success. A friend of Sir Loys has written to him, that in literary circles in London and Edinburgh there is nothing else talked of; and the reviews! Oh, you must see what the — and the — say of it. We are so proud! But of course, *we* knew that Collingwood *must* always succeed in anything he chose to attempt; he is so clever!'

'A poet! a real poet!' said Margaret, with a reverential astonishment. 'I have heard that Mr. Collingwood Fernleigh is highly talented, but I did not know that he was a poet. Oh, how I shall like to know him. When is he coming here?'

'In a few days, perhaps; but he is always very uncertain. I am sure you will like him—everybody does.'

'I am sure I shall, if he is so clever; you must show me his poem, Helen.'

'Caryl shall read it aloud to us, after tea. I have seen it, but I have not read it. Colin only forwarded it to us this morning; it was such a charming surprise.'

Here there came a knock at the door, and a blythe voice said—

'Young ladies, my father has come down, and is enquiring for you. Helen, make haste.'

Helen ran to the door, through a little chink whereof, a whiskered face was profanely peering.

'Go away Caryl, I must change my dress. We will be down in ten minutes.'

'Will Miss Fielding allow me to take *her* down?'

'No, she will wait for me, go along;' and the door was unceremoniously slammed in the face of the intruder, who retreated in discomfiture, while Helen hastily donned an evening dress, and Margaret sat looking on, abstractedly. Presently she asked—

'Is Mr. Fernleigh a poet as well as Mr. Collingwood?'

'Miss Marston says he is one of "the mute inglorious Miltons," a poet who has not yet found utterance. Give me a pin, Margaret. Perhaps he has been awaiting an

inspiring influence?' And she glanced archly at her friend.

'Has Collingwood found that influence *here*?' retorted Margaret; but Helen did not hear that enquiry

Sir Loys had forgotten his impending attack of gout, in the literary triumph of his youngest son, and he welcomed Miss Fielding with an empressement that flattered and charmed her.

Sir Loys Fernleigh was some years older than Mr. Fielding, rather below middle stature, with a slight spare frame, and small delicate features, to which Caryl's bore a marked resemblance. But though both the baronet and his tenant were intelligent and gentlemanly men, Mr. Fielding would have suffered by a comparison between them. His refinement was the more superficial grace of *manner*, while that of Sir Loys

was of nature; the difference was like that between the polish of the pebble and the glow of the gem. The little party were all in high spirits at their favourite's success; and if Margaret had won their admiration before, she sealed her victory now, by her cordial and unaffected sympathy.

'We'll ring for tea,' said Mrs. Grenfell, 'and then we'll have lights, and draw the curtains to make a long evening, and Caryl shall read his brother's poem aloud to us.'

The motion was carried by acclamation, and the tea-things being removed, the soft golden October twilight was ruthlessly excluded, and replaced (by your leave, Mr. Dean Alford, this word *must* be employed until you can 'replace' it with an equivalent) by a reading-lamp, and Caryl addressed himself to his pleasant task.

Decidedly it was a happy, cosy, party

Sir Loys sat by the fire opposite his sister. Mrs. Grenfell—who had as much 'idea' of poetry as a cat has of navigation—sat back in her easy chair, her hands folded on her lap, her eyes half closed, and a smile on her lips which, if it had no prompting from the intellect, at least shone warm from the heart. Helen sat on her cushion at her feet, looking really pretty, with a flush of happy excitement brightening her usually colourless cheek, and her large dark eyes fixed with such rapt intensity of enthusiasm on the reader's face. To be sure, if the poem had been written by any one but Collingwood she could not have understood much more of it than her step-mother did; but here, too, the heart was interpreter to the brain, and perhaps it is better qualified for the office than people are apt to fancy. Margaret had withdrawn herself a

little from the family group, to seat herself in the embrasure of a deep bay window, partly concealed by the folds of the curtain, and whence, herself in shadow, she could watch unobserved the expression of the faces before her, though, if truth be told, her eyes seldom wandered from that of the reader, when his deep rich voice broke suddenly forth in words whose melody was exquisite as its own. The poem, a dramatised Greek legend, was the work of an accomplished scholar and artist; but the cold severity of classical form was flushed all through with the warmth of human passion that gave it the life-like glow of tinted statuary. The richness of imagery, the tenderness of pathos, were expressed with a rare skill of harmonious versification, to which Caryl's voice gave its fullest effect. A less partial audience, and a far

more competent one, must have applauded such a work as this. It was ended; then came a momentary silence, followed by a burst of eager admiration and delight, in which Sir Loys, Mrs. Grenfell, and Helen, talked, exclaimed, and criticised, all together and all at once. But Margaret scarcely heard them. Again that strange thrill—too keen for pleasure, too sweet for pain—made her pulses flutter like a newly-captured bird as the impassioned music of the reader's voice sent the 'winged words' to awaken a faint tremulous echo in her maiden consciousness. Rouse up, Margaret, the Philistines are upon you! the bands first woven to hold you were but the green withes of a childish fancy; but if you sleep *now* beneath the enchantment that is breathing its spell around you, you will wake shorn of all your boasted strength of will and

intellect, to the blindness of a servile captivity!

'NEVER!'

She did not know that she had spoken half aloud till those magical tones murmured low beside her.

'"*Never*," Margaret? that is often a sad word, and sometimes a cruel one; there are sweeter words that I would rather hear from your lips; there is more of hope and promise in "*for ever*."'

'Mr. Fernleigh, don't you find this room insufferably hot? I can't think how Mrs. Grenfell can bear it. I am positively suffocating.'

Mr. Fernleigh answered by bending over her to undo the fastenings of the window that opened on the lawn. His arm almost touched her shoulder; her quick impatient breathing fanned his cheek. How stiff the

fastenings always are in these old houses! It opened at last. Margaret bounded out upon the lawn, and her lover followed.

'Caryl!' cried Sir Loys, 'what are you about? you are giving us all our death, with that draught of cold night air.'

Caryl turned and carefully closed the window, with a dutiful anxiety not to give his father cold. Once more he was at Miss Fielding's side, when Helen emerged from the study, with a hat and shawl in her hand.

'If you will take Margaret a stargazing, Car'l, she must put on these wraps, at least. How can you be so imprudent?'

Margaret's moment of weakness was past; she took the hat and shawl, and turned back into the room again.

'Thanks, Helen, for my hat—no, dear, not the shawl. I must go home now, papa will be expecting me. So kind of you, Sir Loys,

to admit me to the privilege of a first hearing of Mr. Collingwood's beautiful poem. A great many repetitions will not exhaust such a pleasure. I shall hope to hear it again, in papa's company. No, Mr. Fernleigh, you must not come with me; I have been too exacting of your leisure to day. Sir Loys will allow one of the servants to see me home!'

'Oh, certainly my dear, John shall go with you; but that need not prevent Caryl from going too.'

The old gentleman, in the innocence of his soul, thought that Miss Fielding did not think it 'proper' to walk alone in the evening with a young man, and highly approved of her discretion.

Now, had not this been a happy day for Caryl, and ought it not to reach the climax of happiness at its close? The distance from

the Park to the Manor was about three-quarters of a mile, by the main avenue and the road. But there was a much shorter path, through the Coppice, and across the Old Chase, and yet Caryl—wasn't it odd of him?—chose to take the longer route. For some little way he walked beside her silently, and then came the climax, that was to determine for him the character of the day, to impress it for ever on his memory as happiest or most wretched. In a few brief words, eloquent with earnest feeling, passionate in the very force of their manly self-restraint, he told Margaret Fielding that he loved her, and asked her to become the pride and blessing of his home.

'As the world reckons worth,' he said, 'there is many a man whose rank and riches may give him a far greater claim than mine to the privilege of wooing and winning you,

but there is none who will love you more truly or more loyally. Nor is it all sunshine that I ask you to share with me; but the sunshine will always brighten in your presence, and it shall be the study of *my* life that its shadow shall not darken *yours*.'

He paused, but Margaret gave no sign. She was musing over his words in the morning, and wondering what 'sorrow' was that he had prayed she might never know? what 'shadow' was that he hoped would never fall on her? At length, Caryl ventured timidly to take her hand, which rested passively in his clasp.

'One word, Margaret; only one, so it be not the one you whispered to yourself in the window to-night?'

Margaret withdrew her hand gently.

'Mr. Fernleigh, three months ago we

were strangers, and you already propose that we should be more than friends.'

To the lover, this speech had much the pleasant effect of a cold stream of water trickling down the back of his neck. He answered, a little reproachfully:

'Do not trifle with me, Margaret; I have spoken frankly to you, as soul to soul; do not reply with the cold conventionalities of a heartless coquetry.'

'Indeed, it is not from affectation or coquetry that I speak so, but with the real feeling, that the engagement of a life's affections and duty should have a deeper basis than the pleasant acquaintance of a few weeks' date.'

'Is that all? if time is all you ask, I will bear the trial of *years*, if needful, to prove to you how reverently I can await the priceless treasure that I seek; but be generous, dear;

do not unnecessarily prolong my probation, by insincere or coquettish reserve.'

They had now entered the drive to the Manor House; the servant turned up a side path leading to the offices, to deliver a message with which he had been charged to the housekeeper; and Caryl paused under the shadow of a great beech tree that swept to the ground a few yards from the house.

'You will let me love you, then?' he whispered tenderly; 'you will let me hope for your love?'

'Say *friendship*,' Margaret began, but stopped suddenly, remembering the unlucky essay she had formerly made in that direction with Evans. Something, too, in her secret heart told her that the words rising to her lips were false and unmeaning.

'No,' said her lover, 'I will *not* say friendship, because it is not friendship that I ask,

or that I offer. I have friendship for Helen, for Miss Marston, but I *love* you. I will wait till you think me worthy to receive your pledge, if you will but give me the hope of one day winning it. May I wait, Margaret?'

She laid her hand on his with a touch light as a dream of thistledown, and answered gravely:

'Yes.'

At that moment the hall-door opened, and a light streamed out on the gravel walk.

'I will leave you here,' said Caryl, 'there is Harrison looking out for you; but I may come to-morrow, may I not? to see your father?'

'Yes,' again replied Miss Fielding, and turned away.

He stood watching her slight figure as it

emerged into the stream of light poured upon it by the old butler Harrison. He watched until the door closed on her, leaving nothing but darkness all around him; then he too went pensively homewards. He shivered a little as he went, as if he felt the night air chilly; yet surely, oh surely, this had been a happy day for Caryl Fernleigh!

CHAPTER XI.

WILLOUGHBY IN ECLIPSE.

But from the light and fiery dreams of love
Spring heavy sorrows, and a sleepless life,
Visions, not dreams, whose lids no charm shall close
Nor song assuage them waking; and swift death
Crushes with sterile feet the unripening ear:
Treads out the timeless vintage.

Atalanta in Calydon.

If that memorable day had been bright with sunshine for Caryl, it must be admitted that it lay in dreariest eclipse for his unlucky rival. As the half-maddened Pathfinder dashed down the Chase, with his scarcely less infuriated rider, Willoughby's soul was

bitter within him, not only with the soreness of Miss Fielding's unqualified rejection, but with the suspicion, more painful still to a vain man, that he had made himself ridiculous. The look of well-bred surprise on Caryl's features at his unrepressed exhibition of ill-temper rankled in his remembrance, and he derived scant comfort from the reflection that by his indulgence of that ill-temper he had afforded his rival the very opportunity he was probably looking for of completing his triumph, and that he had thus (as he elegantly termed it), 'cut off his nose to be revenged on his face.' Pathfinder, as was natural, took the shortest road to his stable, and being a horse of discretion, and nowise influenced by his rider's example of self-amputation, he soon slackened his pace, and brought himself up before a high gate that barred his further

progress, without risking his neck by attempting to leap it. The necessity of dismounting to open the gate had a calming effect upon Willoughby's irritation; and by the time he reached the Manor House both he and his horse were cool enough to incur no danger of exciting the malevolent comments of the grooms. Mr. Fielding, the servant said, was writing letters in the library, and had given orders that he was not to be disturbed. So Evans helped himself to some cigars that he found lying on the hall table, and strolled leisurely into the shrubberies to mature his meditations.

Willoughby Evans was not a man to yield unresistingly to defeat, or without at least an effort to retain the honours of war; and his first disappointment over, he was anxious to convince himself that the game was really and irretrievably lost, or that there

was yet any possibility of saving it. He had evidently made a false move in failing to secure the heiress while he had yet the field to himself. He had deluded himself with the idea that a brief separation would be followed by such a joy at his reappearance as would break through all that 'cursed affectation of prudery' which he had believed to be merely the disguise of a tender attachment. 'And so it would,' he mused, 'if, as I fancied, she had been moped up in this stupid hole with scarcely a soul to speak to. How was I to know that there was a young fellow living almost "next door" to her, who has nothing to do but to philander after her all day long? What chance has a poor devil without house or land against the eldest son of a Baronet, with the *name* at least of a rent-roll? And—well, yes—I daresay she calls

him good-looking too; he gives himself all the airs of an Apollo, and girls like that. I ought to have nailed her when I had her all to myself, in the old lady's time;' and Evans, as he thus acknowledged his error, and the mortifying position in which it had placed him, swept the universe with Professor Porson's comprehensive execration, and 'd—d the nature of things!'

But, if the enemy *had* marched off with the prize, was there no possibility of so harassing him in the rear that he might even be induced to abandon it? Of course, her rumoured inheritance was her chief attraction (for Willoughby did not know, and would not have believed, that only Sir Loys was cognisant of Margaret's 'prospects'); but old Morton had, as yet, the keys of the money-bags. He was not unfavourable to his clerk's pretensions; his

interest wou d go some way in 'backing' his candidate; and without his consent to the marriage, Fernleigh might not think it so very desirable. Then, there were those letters Margaret was always bothering about. Quite harmless letters they were, and had neither value nor significance for Willoughby, who would have thrown them into the fire without hesitation but for the silly girl's evident anxiety to regain them. 'She's afraid that fellow might get to hear of them, and——' Here Willoughby paused, and fixed his eyes meditatively on the ground. 'No, it wouldn't do; she'd hate me for ever, and a woman is an awkward enemy, she's so spiteful and venomous; but I might coax a little out of old Morton by way of compensation for his god-daughter's jilting me. I don't see my way to anything better just now. She shan't have her letters. I'll keep

that thorn in your side, Miss Vixen!' And soothed and comforted by this amiable resolve, Mr. Evans sauntered back to the house, to amuse himself with solitary billiard practice, until the welcome music of the first dinner-bell reminded him that in his ill-humour he had forgotten his lunch. That day he was the sole guest at the dinner-table. Mr. Fielding was courteous, but cold and abstracted, and Evans not unnaturally attributed his coldness to pride, and resented it by a sullen silence, which his host, absorbed in his own reflections, never so much as noticed. But how Willoughby's heart would have danced within him if he could have known what those reflections really were, or if he could have seen these few lines, received by Mr. Fielding that very morning:—

'DEAR FIELDING,—I sent up to the office

this afternoon, and heard that you were gone down to Fernleigh Manor, and had taken Evans with you. I am very ill. Make up your mind at *once* to the arrangement I proposed to you yesterday, for there's no time to lose. I will send the document to you by Evans, when I have seen and spoken to him; and you can look it over together, and suggest such modifications of it as you think advisable for Margaret's advantage and security. The young people can settle the rest together.

'Yours,

'MORTON.'

No wonder that the dinner was not very lively! The evening dragged wearily on, and when the clock struck ten, Mr. Fielding rang the bell.

'Harrison, have you sent James to the Park for your mistress?'

'Miss Fielding came home an hour ago, sir, and went to her own rooms.'

'Did she come on foot?'

'Yes, sir; Mr. Fernleigh left her at the gate. John came with them, and told the housekeeper so.'

Not for worlds would Harrison have been suspected of 'spying' on his young mistress.

'Oh, very well; then I'll go up to her. Good night, Mr. Evans.' And Mr. Fielding proceeded to his daughter's apartment, knocked lightly at the door, and entered.

Margaret was sitting by the fire, in a white peignoire, apparently under the impression that she was brushing her hair, as it lay in its wealth of unbraided masses round her shoulders and waist. But the hand that held the brush was idle on her lap, and her eyes were fixed upon the pretty little feet that rested on the fender, with an

earnestness quite disproportionate to their apparent object. Mr. Fielding took a chair and sat down opposite to her.

'Have you had a pleasant day, my child?'

'I don't know—I suppose so—oh yes, very pleasant.'

The father took secret note of this incoherence.

'Mr. Evans told me that he had left you with young Fernleigh. I was sure that he would take you to the Park, and that they would detain you with them there. How did you amuse yourself; was there any party?'

'No, only me. We had early dinner, and after tea Mr. Fernleigh read aloud his brother's poem to us.'

'Indeed! I was not aware that Mr. Collingwood Fernleigh was a poet. Was it worth listening to?'

'Worth listening to—' repeated Margaret absently; and added, with startling abruptness: 'Papa, Mr. Fernleigh has made me an offer of marriage.'

Margaret had intended to make this announcement with the utmost dignity and self-possession, and never could understand how she came to break down in it so disgracefully. Her father did not answer immediately, and when she glanced at him, surprised at his silence, he started from a reverie, and said:

'Well, my love; and what answer have you given him?'

'Not any decided answer; he is willing to wait until a longer acquaintance ——'

She stopped, and Mr. Fielding smiled.

'I see; he is taken on trial, as Pathfinder was before I finally purchased him?'

'Oh, papa, don't laugh at me! I should

despise myself if I could be so easily won to what silly sentimental girls call love!'

'Well, well—(the father was becoming bewildered by the young lady's platonics, and beginning to find his rôle of confidant somewhat embarrassing)—but what is the understanding between you and Mr. Fernleigh, my love? I should wish to know that.'

'Papa, when a girl "engages" herself to a man, is she *bound* to marry him sooner or later?'

'Certainly; the word "engaged" can bear no other significance.'

'Then I think that Mr. Fernleigh considers himself engaged to *me*, but I am not engaged to *him*.'

'That is nonsense, dear; no contract can be binding on one party alone. I suppose you mean that you like Mr. Fernleigh well enough to hope one day to like him more—

as a woman should like the man she means to marry—is that it?'

'Yes; but if I should never like him more—if I should see reason to like him less—I have not bound myself to him, have I, by any pledge that it would be ungenerous to forfeit?'

'If you saw reason, *sufficient* reason, to withdraw your pledge, you could not be blamed for doing so; but society does not countenance the dissolution of even this provisional bond by mere caprice or inconstancy.'

'You consider, then, that I have engaged myself to Mr. Fernleigh?'

'The world will consider so; the world wisely refuses to recognise or sanction any doubtful relations between a girl of nineteen and a young man of five-and-twenty. I presume that Mr. Fernleigh does not mean

to exclude me from his confidence on this subject?'

'He said he would call on you to-morrow.'

'Then I am to receive him as my future son-in-law?'

'Perhaps; I don't know; you won't give me time. *He* promised to give me time.'

Mr. Fielding mused a moment.

'Well, my love, no one will hurry you; you are only nineteen, and by your grandmother's will you are forbidden to marry until you are one-and-twenty. Surely, two years will be long enough for you to make up your mind whether or not you can love Mr. Fernleigh?'

Margaret was silent for a moment; then she looked up, and asked suddenly:

'Papa, what quarrel has Meredith the gamekeeper with Mr. Fernleigh, about his son?'

'Has he a quarrel, my dear? I suppose he fancies that Fernleigh ought to try and get the scamp off, but ——'

'No, I don't mean *that* son; the other—there was another.'

'Oh! Ah, I think I have heard a rumour of something that happened between Fernleigh and young Meredith while the family were living abroad—something that ended very sadly, I believe; but Caryl could not have been much to blame, or the father of the lad would hardly have continued in Sir Loys' service; and the affair is never alluded to by any of his friends. Why do you ask, Margaret? Must you be informed of all your lover's youthful adventures before you can decide on giving him your hand?'

'Not all, perhaps; but I should wish to know all such as may have influenced his character, or that could throw a light upon it.'

Mr. Fielding laughed.

'There spoke poor grandmamma to the life! She had a docile pupil in you, my child; *you* will never make a runaway match, and marry for love, as your mother did.'

'No,' answered Margaret, 'I will not marry *only* for love.'

For, as she spoke, there rose up before her the remembrance of her father's home, as she had often seen it; the sickly peevish wife, fretfully whining that the cares of business engrossed all her husband's attention, and excluded *her* from his thoughts; the husband, returning weary and harassed to his cheerless fireside, only to be received by querulous complaints or upbraidings; the wail of pining infants, neglected or ignorantly tended by servants whose mistress was too languid or too selfish to recognise

any duty but that of pampering her own ailments; the scant brief mourning, as each wailing voice died into silence,—as each tiny coffin with its white plumes passed from out the door; the scarcely deeper sadness when the larger funeral procession went forth, with the *black* pall and feathers. And this had been a love-match! not—as Lady Tolmaine always impressed upon her grandchild—by any means an exceptionally disappointing one. There was Mr. Sharples, who had eloped with his pretty wife from a boarding-school, and from whom she had lately obtained a divorce on the ground of cruelty, &c. There was Captain West, who had cut his throat (slightly) when Maria Baines 'broke off' with him; and who, when she afterwards married him, had led her such a 'cat-and-dog' life that she had been heard to say, with bitter emphasis, that she had a

perfect horror of—*blunt* razors. And, *à propos* of razors, there was Lady Horton, who had had a brain fever when her friends had refused their consent to her marriage with Sir Julius. Her head was shaved, and she went to church as a bride, with her orange wreath pinned to false ringlets. Her beautiful hair was three years in growing, and before it was quite grown she had eloped with her husband's valet! The old lady never failed to 'point the moral' of these dreary stories, by saying, 'And all these married for *love*, Margaret; you see that coldness, alienation, even hatred, may be, and were, the bitter fruit of a love that is grafted on the emotions only, and not rooted on well-founded and mutual esteem.'

Margaret brooded so long in silence after her last declaration that her father understood that the audience was ended; so,

kissing her forehead, he retired to his own room.

'An odd girl,' he murmured, as he undressed himself; 'she disguises her love in such quaint swathings and swaddling bands, that Cupid looks like a stiff Dutch baby! Well, Mr. Willoughby Evans, *you* are bowled out, that's one comfort; but I must be cautious, or that old fool will disinherit poor Margaret, after all. "Send the will to me," he says. It's not signed; he'll hear reason perhaps before he signs it. I'll write to him; no, I'll wait till he sends me the "document," as he calls it. His whim will pass over, possibly, if I can keep it out of his reach for a week or two. A very odd girl—not a bit like her poor mother; but,' concluded the disconsolate widower, as he turned into his lonely bed, '*that* may be none the worse for Caryl!'

CHAPTER XII.

A CONTRETEMPS FOR CARYL.

What malicious foe
Envying our happiness, and of his own
Despairing, seeks to work us woe and shame
By sly assault? *Paradise Lost.*

MARGARET did not appear at breakfast, and Evans, who perfectly understood that she wished to avoid *him*, scowled like a thunder-cloud at the ham and muffins, and trod viciously on little Frisk's tail, who had incautiously approached him, lured, not certainly by 'love of his sweet looks,' but by the scent of the dainties before him. Mr.

Fielding was so engrossed by the examination of the contents of the post-bag, that he took no notice of Frisk's clamorous remonstrance, which Evans profited by his abstraction to heighten by a kick. Mr. Fielding's attention was fixed, not on a letter of his own, but on one addressed to Willoughby, in a handwriting which, although uncertain and wavering, was unquestionably that of Mr. Morton. What did this correspondence betoken? Morton rarely wrote to the clerk at any time. What could there be so pressing, in his present state of health too, as to induce him to write to him when absent from town? The readiest allowable way of ascertaining the contents of a letter directed to another person is to forward it speedily to its address, so he flung it carlessly across the table.

'From your principal, Mr. Evans—a re-

call, I fear? You are quite my cousin's righthand man, but I had hoped he would have spared you a little longer.'

Oh, fie, Mr. Fielding! when you had been devising, ten minutes before the letters came in, some plan of getting rid of your unloved guest.

Evans glanced over the letter, and looked a little mystified.

'A recall, sir? Yes, he desires me to return by the first train, and call at Queen Square immediately on my arrival. Something may have gone wrong at the office; but there has hardly been time for that.'

'A sick man's caprice, more likely. Morton has been strangely whimsical since his last illness. I almost suspect there is some weakness here (touching his forehead). Does he want to see me too?'

'He doesn't name you.'

'Ah, tell him that he will hear from me to-morrow. The first train? You are too late for that—there is one at twelve. You will reach London at half-past five.'

'May I not see Miss Fielding, sir, to thank her for all her kindness?' asked Willoughby with a suppressed sneer.

'Certainly, I will tell her to come down. You will excuse me. I have several letters to write; one in particular, which I will trouble you to give to my cousin this evening; so good-by, very sorry, &c., &c.'

Evans waited some time, but no Margaret appeared. At last her maid entered.

'Miss Fielding's compliments, she would come down in an hour or two, to bid Mr. Evans good-by; but she was engaged at present, and had a very bad headache.'

The headache was extemporised by Martha, in pity for the good-looking young

gentleman's evident discomfiture, which she attributed to the scant courtesy which he met with, as 'only Morton's clerk.' But Willoughby knew what was apocryphal in the message, and rightly interpreted it as the expression of Margaret's reluctance to give him any longer interview than would suffice for the very briefest farewell. His countenance darkened still more, but he tried to assume an indifferent tone, as he turned to the door, saying:

'Oh, tell your mistress I don't want to disturb her. I shall be back here again in a week or so, to bring her those papers she wants.'

Evans could not have explained to himself why he left this message for Miss Fielding. It was from a mere impulse of spitefulness, to revive a disagreeable subject, to convey a vague menace in connection with it, and

by sending it through the maidservant to give it a character of disrespect, if not of insult. It was not much, but it was all he could do, so he did it, and then, whistling carelessly, he sauntered out of the house and strolled aimlessly into the shrubberies.

He wandered slowly on, his eyes fixed on the ground, till he paused at the end of a path where a rustic gate and paling formed a kind of boundary between the shrubberies that were in charge of the gardener and the wilder sylvan scenery of the woodland. Here two diverging pathways led, one through a by-road across the Old Chase to the woods of Fernleigh Park, and the other through a secluded dingle, called the Beechen Coppice, past the gamekeeper's lodge, to the Hartsknoll railway station. He leaned over the gate, pondering whether he would return to the house or go on to

the station at once. 'They'll have the sense to send my traps there after me, and Miss Margaret will see that I don't set so much store by her parting civilities as to—I'll be shot if that fellow isn't coming along!' The observation referred to Caryl, who at that instant emerged from a green vista, in the avenue leading from the Chase, and advanced, not with the listless grace that characterised his usual movements, but with the elastic buoyancy of expectant hope. He was going to the Manor, that was clear, so early in the day; and he had parted with its young mistress only the night before!

A suspicion of his errand then flashed across Evans' mind, and the fury of jealousy and envy lowered in his eyes, as, still leaning over the gate, he sullenly watched his approach, without offering to make way for him. Caryl thought his countenance was

the reverse of prepossessing, but feeling no great interest in his looks, and never dreaming that its amiable expression had any reference to himself, he touched his hat with a smile when he reached the gate, and said cheerily:

'I am glad to see you safe and well, Mr. Evans. I was afraid Pathfinder might have done you some mischief, when he raced off with you yesterday.'

'And why the devil, sir, should you fancy that nobody can manage a restive horse but yourself?'

The tone of this polite enquiry was worthy of the words. Caryl stared a little, but answered with his usual courtesy:

'I assure you I do not pride myself on skilful horsemanship (he might have justly done so). I thought Pathfinder might have thrown you, because I am sure he would

have thrown *me* at the pace at which he started off. Will you let me through the gate?'

The soft answer, without in the least conciliating Willoughby, shamed him into better behaviour; but he did not open the gate.

'You are going to the Manor House? There's nobody there; Mr. Fielding is engaged on business, and Miss Fielding is confined to her room with a violent headache.'

'I have an appointment with Mr. Fielding,' answered Caryl, glancing a little uneasily at the speaker; 'he will not refuse to receive me.'

And he tried to pass the pertinacious obstruction, but Willoughby, still influenced by the mischievous wish to retard, at least, if he could not prevent, took no notice of the gesture.

'You'll have to wait till I'm gone, for Mr. Fielding is writing letters that I am to carry. I shall go to the station, and wait there for them; it's stupid enough loitering about here. Can you tell me the nearest way through this wood?'

'I will conduct you as far as the Coppice,' said Fernleigh, charmed at the prospect of getting rid of him, 'and then you cannot miss the way.'

To this proposal Willoughby acceded, with a grim attempt at graciousness, and the two young men walked together through the plantations, conversing on such indifferent topics as each, preoccupied as he was, could start, in turn. At last came a silence, which was broken by Evans.

'Miss Margaret is a fine girl, isn't she?'

The tone itself would have grated on Caryl's refined ear, but the words still

more revolted him, and he made no reply. Willoughby continued:

'I've known her since she was *that* high, and I never thought she'd have grown up so handsome. She wants style, some people say. I'm sure she'll not get it in this out-of-the-way hole; but she'll not stop here long, I fancy.'

'Not stop?' repeated Caryl in amazement.

'Well, no; you see she'll be an heiress, and a gold magnet attracts better than a steel one. Miss Margaret will soon be drawn out of this retreat; but she's such an arrant little jilt and coquette, it will take a sharp fellow to do it.'

Caryl flushed high with indignation and disgust. That this vulgar fellow should dare to speak so familiarly of *his* lady love, and to *him*! But he checked the angry

answer that rose to his lips, and said with a frigid stateliness:

'We will change the conversation, Mr. Evans, if you please; it is not my habit to allow *any* lady's name to be discussed with such freedom, and the lady's in question, least of all.'

'And why least of all, pray?' enquired Evans with increasing insolence; '*I* have as much right to speak of her as of any other girl, and more too.'

'As the daughter of your employer,' said Caryl haughtily, 'she has even a greater title to your respect than any other lady. I regret that you should need to be reminded of this.'

Evans sneered.

'And I say, that she has been more to me, than "the daughter of my employer' should have been if she hadn't been a pretty

girl; and she would have been more still if she hadn't been a jilt, as I have letters of hers to prove.'

'That is false.'

The young men fronted each other now in an attitude of undisguised hostility.

'Say that again!'

'It is a dastardly lie.'

The words had scarcely passed Caryl's lips when a blow from Willoughby felled him to the ground, where he lay among the fern as still as if he liked it.

But Evans did not like it at all. His long pent-up irritation had found vent in the hasty blow, and now instantly came the reaction. He had done for himself now! He had sinned past forgiveness, and would be expelled from Fernleigh Manor for ever. More than that, Mr. Morton himself would turn against him.

His situation, his character, all his future prospects, had been ruined by that impulse of unreasoning fury. And why didn't the fellow get up? But Caryl did not stir. He approached, looking anxiously down upon him, and started when a voice behind him said—

'You've done it now, Master Evans; he's got more than he's used to, I reckon.'

Evans turned, and beheld Meredith the keeper, leaning on his gun, and surveying the prostrate figure of young Fernleigh, with a look in which curiosity was mingled with a strange malignant satisfaction. Evans had seen Meredith at the Lodge on the day of his arrival, and now asked him eagerly—

'Is he much hurt, do you think? Confound it, I didn't mean to be so rough. He —he's not *dead*?'

'He looks *simple* enough, that's certain;

a little would kill him, he's been so pampered and *marred*.'

'Good God!' exclaimed Evans, 'if he's dead, I'm a ruined man!'

Meredith bent down, and a gleam of cruel exultation flitted across his features as he gazed fixedly at the death-like form at his feet.

'Don't be so scared, man, it's no harm; he's coming to.' And, in fact, Caryl opened his eyes, and made an effort to raise himself.

'Take my arm, Mr. Fernleigh,' said the keeper; but the young man turned from him, half rose, and sank back again.

'He's done for—I am utterly ruined!' moaned Evans, in desperation; but Caryl looked up again, and got upon his feet, where he stood silently gazing on his now penitent adversary.

'He's all right,' said Meredith. 'Shall I see you home, Mr. Fernleigh?'

Caryl, still silent, signed a negative, and the keeper touched his hat and walked away.

'Mr. Fernleigh,' said Evans, 'I apologise for my violence; you can revenge yourself by ruining me, if you choose to do it.'

'You are quite able to ruin yourself, sir,' answered Caryl coldly. 'I have no wish to forestall you in doing so.'

He turned, as if to go, but Evans resumed—

'I will give you the satisfaction of a gentleman for the insult I have offered you, if you demand it; but you must admit that you gave the first provocation?'

'I am no adept in the accomplishments of the prize-ring, Mr. Willoughby Evans.

I am satisfied of your superior skill and science. As for the term "gentleman," I admit no man's claim to *that* who can speak of any woman as you have just done of a lady whose name I respect too highly to bring it again into discussion. I gave you the lie, and I refuse to retract it. You cannot recall your blow. We may both rest content with what "satisfaction" we can either of us find in that.'

'You can revenge yourself,' repeated Willoughby, half sullenly, half deprecatingly; 'of course I am not your equal, I am only a salaried clerk, and a word from you can ruin me. What I said was only a jest; I've known the young lady as many years as you have months.'

Caryl's generous nature was touched at once by the appeal.

'You are in no danger from me, Mr.

Evans,' he said, 'so long as you remember in future that *no* lady's name is a fit subject for jesting.' And with that he turned back into the path leading to the Old Chase, while Evans, terrified and crestfallen, proceeded to the railway station.

We have spoken of a relic of Fernleigh's ancient glory still existing, in the shape of an old tower, that remained standing close by the more modern mansion. In this tower was a winding stair leading to a small chamber at the top, in which the walls and part of the roof remained uninjured. Caryl had caused it to be repaired, glazed, and made habitable, and had adopted it for his own private retreat. Of this room he always kept the key, and it was understood in the family that his retirement there was to be invariably respected, and no intrusion

upon it to be at any time permitted. In his own bedroom, or in his father's library, anyone might interrupt him; but without an invitation (which he rarely gave) no one ever presumed to seek him in what they called his 'lair,' and the frequency of his visits there was considered an indication of the greater or less degree of the mental depression to which he was occasionally subject. Thither, then, he fled, after his enemy's assault, not exactly by reason of mental depression (although there is nothing very exhilarating in the circumstance of having been knocked down), but because he wanted to reflect—safe from curious eyes—on the re-arrangement of the plans that had been deranged by this unfortunate encounter. His dress was disordered, his hair was dishevelled, the crown of his hat was beaten in,

and so was the crown of his head for all he knew, for he felt sick and giddy as he stumbled up the narrow stairs, and relocking the door as he entered, threw himself into the only seat the room contained and collected his scattered thoughts. The insensibility that had so terrified Evans had resulted more from the shock sustained by a sensitive and highly nervous system than from any graver injury; and the air, blowing in upon him from the lancet window, with the silence and quiet, soon restored him to himself; although he was clearly in no fit trim to present himself before Miss Fielding or her father as a wooer. But he had named no hour, and it was early yet. He would go to his own room, rearrange his toilet and ride over. He first, however, looked around for certain toilet requisites, that he had been accustomed to keep in his lair, but—oh!

horror—his dressing-case had vanished, and he remembered that since the new tenants had come to the Manor House his visits to the tower had become so rare that he had brought all his possessions into his bedroom, lest the damp might injure them. At the same moment he became conscious of a puffy sensation in his left temple. Could he have got a black eye? Nothing more likely, considering the circumstances; and he glanced wildly round the turret in search of what in a calmer moment he would never have expected to find there, i.e. a looking-glass. There being none there, the only alternative left him was to rush as speedily as possible across the lawn and through the hall, gain his own room without attracting observation, and ring for Maitland, Sir Loys' valet, to apply such remedies as the case might require. The stable clock clanged one—now

for it! Sir Loys and the ladies would be at lunch, the footman (the establishment was a modest one, and there was not a numerous retinue)—the footman would be waiting upon them, the other servants would all be at their dinner. He ran down the rugged steps, glided in the shadow of the evergreen bushes that fringed the lawn, and had just crossed the hall when a door at the side suddenly opened, and he found himself the centre of an admiring group consisting of Sir Loys, Mrs. Grenfell, Helen, and John the footman, who was ushering them to the dining-room to lunch. A cry of horror burst from his assembled relatives, blending in a triple utterance that was certainly not a *glee*.

'What in the name of goodness ——?'

'He's been murdered! he's *assaisonné*!'

'Oh, good gracious! he's knocked his eye out!'

This last observation was uttered by Helen with such a piercing scream, that Caryl involuntarily lifted his hand to his face, expecting to find a vacancy where the missing organ should have been; but instead of a hollow he felt a tumour, as big as an albatross's egg. No chance *now* of evading enquiry; he must put the best face he could on the business (and oh; what a face that was)!'

'Let me pass,' he said, 'I am not much hurt; I want to go to my own room to set myself to rights.'

They made way for him to pass, but instantly closed behind him and followed him to his apartment, exchanging as they did so, looks of bewilderment and consternation.

'I am not much hurt,' repeated the sufferer, 'go away all of you, and send

Maitland with some vinegar, or a beefsteak, or something (Caryl suggested the latter item in the vague idea that beefsteak was good for bruises, but I rather think he meant to apply it *internally*)—there's not much the matter, I assure you.'

'But *what* is the matter?' asked Sir Loys, 'you have received a violent blow; who have you been fighting with?'

'Fighting!' cried Helen, 'as if Caryl could fight! He has only been to the Manor House, uncle.'

'The idea!' said Aunt Flo, 'as if Mr. Fielding or Margaret would fight with him!'

The idea of violence from Mr. or Miss Fielding made Caryl laugh; but he continued to bathe his injured face in cold water, and made no answer to his questioners till his father came to his relief.

'There, go down stairs Nell and Flo, and

leave my son to me. Ladies can do nothing in these cases; send Maitland here.'

But when the necessary remedies had been applied and the wondering valet dismissed, Sir Loys turned the key upon all intruders, and said anxiously to the young man:

'Now, my dear boy, who has done this?'

'No one, father; a mere accident;—that is, I cannot tell you—let the matter drop.'

'You have been to the Manor House?'

'No, I did not go so far; I have been some time in the tower. To tell the truth, I hoped to slip in here unobserved, hoping that this misfortune would pass over without notice.'

'Without notice! a disfigurement like that! Why you'll not be fit to be seen for a week to come.'

'For a week?' repeated Caryl, aghast.

'Nor yet so soon. Can it be Meredith who has struck you?'

'It was not Meredith; do not question me further. I entreat you, as a personal favour.'

'Well, since you insist upon it,' said Sir Loys, reluctantly; 'and you never reached the Manor House after all? What will Margaret think of your absence? and Mr. Fielding, for he will naturally expect to see you to-day.'

Caryl's only answer was a rueful glance at the mirror, which certainly gave back but a broken image of a gay suitor. The father smiled.

'Come, Car'l, my dear fellow, I must come to your relief, I see; I'll drive up to the Manor House myself this evening and set everything straight for you there. Old people are good for something, my boy, eh? But

what must I say about this "accident?" We must both be "in one story," you know.'

'Say that I fell in the wood. I did fall.'

'So I should think. You have received a blow that would have felled an ox. And as for business arrangements—you give me full powers as your ambassador to Fielding?'

'My dear father,' replied Caryl, 'I know that no transaction between gentlemen can be in more delicate or honourable hands than yours; only recollect that I hardly consider myself as Miss Fielding's *accepted* lover. The answer was too vague; too conditional, I might almost say.'

'All right,' said Sir Loys, gaily; 'I will leave all as vague as you can wish with the young lady, but between the greybeards,

the understanding must be more definite. You have confidence in me.'

'Unlimited confidence, my dear sir; such as there has always been, and shall always be.'

'Except?'—and Sir Loys glanced archly at the young man's bandaged brows.

Caryl smiled.

'It is a mere trifle. A fellow I met in the wood was insolent, and when I resented his insolence he knocked me down. I forgave him. I did not wish to injure him.'

'Then it was not a retainer of ours?'

'In no sense.'

'Some one belonging to Fielding. Well, take your own way, Car'l. Indeed, if you wouldn't pay back the rascal in his own coin, as I know you would not, you can hardly stoop to punish him from the vantage ground of your superior station. Lie down

now, and I'll send you some wine. I'll come up again, before I go to the Manor House.'

And away went Sir Loys, charmed at the prospect of the embassy which had thus devolved upon him.

CHAPTER XIII.

FATHERS-IN-LAW.

Pro. Now does my project gather to ahead:
My charms crack not, my spirits obey, and Time
Goes upright with his carriage.

MEANTIME, Mr. Fielding, in happy unconsciousness of the new claim to his regard that had been won by Mr. Morton's candidate for the honours of being his son-in-law, was congratulating himself that he had got rid of his *bête noire* for the present, and before he could have it in his power to communicate to his principal any tidings of the negotiations pending between the

families at the Park and the Manor House. 'He must not think that I have hurried matters, or the ill-tempered old brute will get unmanageable. Margaret can't marry for two years, and Morton *may* live twenty, though he's not likely to do so. Time—time is the great object—fair and softly goes far in a day.'

As for Margaret, she descended from her retreat when she knew that the inexorable train must have started that was to carry Evans away. She came down on pretence of looking after her flowers, but her eyes wandered repeatedly to the windows, and she started every time the gardener's step sounded on the gravel-walk beneath them, just as any young girl might do who expected her lover. But no lover appeared.

Then she went upon the terrace, and pruned her rose-trees—very scientifically, no

doubt, but the Austrian Briar and 'Blairii No. 2' did not flower the following spring, and the gardener said she must have mistaken them for 'Jaunty Battles' and 'General Jerk-my-Nose'; and so possibly she did. Next she went to the piano, and played a slow stately melody, something between a dirge and a minuet, that had been a great favourite of old Lady Tolmaine's (Margaret's thoughts were much of her grandmamma to-day). Then she went to lunch, and I am ashamed to say ate not only without remorse, but even with apparent relish, the tender wing, and the (once) 'brooding breast' of a wood-dove in a pie! After that refreshment she retired to her dressing-room, when being desirous to 'keep up' her Italian (as well as her spirits), she read that cheerful, humane, and most Christian poem, the 'Inferno' of Dante, until it was

time to dress for dinner; and having performed that ceremonial for herself, she proceeded to decorate her dog. Now, Frisk's grande toilette was usually a bow of blue ribbon. This Margaret tied round his neck, and then saying, 'No, Frisk, it looks sentimental and *shepherdess* like;' she snatched it off, and substituted a little steel chain collar. What *could* have been in her thoughts?

Her father glanced at her a little inquisitively when she came down, for he, too, had been expecting Caryl all the afternoon, and was puzzled to think what could have become of him. 'Odd girl,' was his inward reflection, as he watched her, 'she does not seem a bit flurried or disappointed at this strange coldness in her suitor—she's a very queer girl.' And Mr. Fielding began to feel for his daughter something like the mild

surprise, not unmixed with awe, that may be supposed to animate the bosom of a hen that has hatched a brood of tall goslings, who speak in a language she does not comprehend, and exhibit aquatic tastes and grazing appetites to which she is a perfect stranger. It was not, however, until the servant had retired after dinner that he ventured an enquiry on the subject of mutual interest.

'Did you not tell me to expect a visit from Mr. Fernleigh this morning, Margaret? Has his courage failed him, think you? or have you received any note of excuse?'

'No,' replied the young lady very calmly, 'no excuse was needed, he may have been detained on business, *it will do just as well to-morrow.*'

'Do just as well to-morrow!' repeated Mr. Fielding, staring at her in astonishment.

You seem pretty evenly matched for coolness, if this is how you take it both of you. Young people were less philosophical in *my* time.'

While he spoke a carriage was heard approaching the house, and drove up to the door.

'The close carriage from the Park, I declare! Why, Margaret, he is coming in state to woo. Hallo! what's this? Sir Loys, and *alone*.'

He hurried into the hall to receive his guest, and left his daughter standing irresolutely by the table, her eyes turned towards the door, and her rich colour coming and going with a changefulness that said little for her philosophy just then. Sir Loys' unexpected arrival *alone* startled her, she scarcely knew why. The alteration in the programme that she had arranged in her own

mind disturbed her equanimity. Oh yes, that was all! Still, the voice of the old baronet, speaking gaily (though it was not in the programme), restored her to composure, and she went forward to receive him, as he entered, with her usual frank ease and grace.

'Will you forgive my intrusion at such an hour, my dear Miss Fielding?' said he, as he took her hand; 'I must let this (giving her a note) plead my excuse.' 'Nothing for me, my good friend (to Mr. Fielding), I am on diet you know. I reckoned on having a quiet hour or two with you over your wine, until Miss Margaret will give me a cup of tea in the drawing-room.' Upon which hint, Margaret vanished.

The ensuing conference was satisfactory to both the elders. Mr. Fielding, who had a business-like preference for transacting affairs with principals, and who looked upon

Sir Loys as the principal in this affair, from a business point of view, was not so sorry as he professed to be for the accident that had compelled Caryl to send his father in his place. Yet, after all, the money matters were very easily disposed of. Sir Loys had little to promise in the way of settlements on his future daughter-in-law. Until the last few years the Fernleigh estates had been heavily encumbered with debt incurred by their former proprietors, and although the burden had been diminished by Sir Loys' prudence and self-denial, an extensive outlay would be necessary for repairs and improvements before the long-neglected lands could yield a remunerative income. But Mr. Fielding wanted no settlements. Nothing beyond security for his daughter's fortune. Why should he wish for more? Was not *he*, too, a Fernleigh? Was it not for *his*

pride and glory, scarcely less than for Sir Loys', that the old family should raise its head once more, and rank among the *wealthiest* as among the *noblest* in the land?

'And so it will, my dear sir, so it will,' said the merchant, forgetting in his enthusiasm the letter from Mr. Morton that was still in his waistcoat pocket. 'If Margaret has her rights, she will be one of the richest heiresses in England; how far more gratifying to me that her fortune should return to our own ancient family than that it should enrich strangers.'

This sentiment was, of course, highly gratifying to the baronet, and appeared to him to be perfectly natural.

Of course Mr. Fielding, in spite of his change of name, was still a Fernleigh. The members of that family had always been closely united (except when they 'kicked

each other out,' as Mr. Morton coarsely phrased it); how fortunate that the gold which it needed should flow to it through the restoration of the once alienated branch!

And the two gentlemen talked, and flattered and congratulated themselves, and one another, until Mr. Fielding persuaded himself that Morton's threat was a mere chimera, and Evans, as heir, a hideous phantom; and that the only reality was that his cousin's millions were the destined heritage of his own descendants, the future Fernleighs of Fernleigh Park and Chase.

Meantime, Margaret had fled into the drawing-room with her note, and was kneeling on the hearthrug to read it by firelight. It was from Helen Grenfell, and ran thus:—

'DEAREST, DEAREST MARGARET,—Don't be uneasy about our darling Caryl. He has been hurt in the wood, not seriously; only

he is *such a* dreadful figure that he won't be fit to be seen for a week. He would have written himself, but he seems to fear that it would be *presumptuous*; though, if I *dared* guess why uncle has gone so late to the Manor House to excuse him to Mr. Fielding, I should think he *might* have ventured. Dearest, he looks so wretched, and so disappointed, as far as one *can see* how he looks. *Do* write him a little word of comfort, and come to-morrow to your fond

'HELEN.'

'What a little goose it is!' ejaculated Margaret. But she wouldn't write to Caryl; perhaps she had had too much of writing to young men. She only said to Sir Loys at parting:

'Please tell Helen I will come and see her to-morrow.'

Whereupon the old gentleman cour-

teously kissed the little hand he held, saying, with a kindly smile:

'In my character as *ambassador*, Margaret;' and then, drawing her towards him, he kissed her forehead, whispering, 'in my *future* character as *father*, my dear.'

Mr. Fielding escorted his visitor to his carriage, and Margaret ran and locked herself into her own room, as if she feared his pursuit; then, after some moments' reverie, she said to her dog:

'They seem to think, Frisk, that I have *engaged* myself.'

Frisk wagged his tail at the news, and the light gleamed on the steel links of his collar. Margaret took it off and tied on the rejected blue ribbon, murmuring as she did so, though with a smile too:

'Only a *silken tie*, Frisk; but no chains—no chains *for me!*'

CHAPTER XIV.

'IN MY LADY'S BOWER.'

Shall I sing of happy hours,
Numbered by opening and by closing flowers,—
Of smiles, and sighs that give no pain,
Softly heard in leafy bowers?

HARTLEY COLERIDGE.

MARGARET'S message was duly delivered by Sir Loys to Helen, and by her to Caryl, but that young gentleman looked at his swollen and discoloured face in the glass (he had never looked so often in the glass before in so short an interval), and his lover-like anxiety to receive the sympathy of his beloved was fairly overpowered by horror

at his disfigurement, so the very next morning he caught up a carpet-bag, and rushed away, as fast as steam could carry him, to a bachelor friend in South Wales, where he hid his (not) diminished head, until his features resumed their natural delicacy of outline, and only a faint amber circle, like a gold-rimmed eyeglass, surrounding one eye, remained of the external injury. But was there no deeper wound in the sting of the words that had preceded the blow? Or had Caryl forgotten those? No, he had not forgotten; he was not likely to forget them. They had left an ache—not of jealousy, he could not stoop to be jealous of a Willoughby Evans,—but of something that rankled like a thorn, an uneasy sense of there being something that ought to be explained between Margaret and himself that could doubtless be so readily explained!

But to ask an explanation would seem to imply a doubt, and the loyal-hearted lover shrank from that. Still those words kept recurring to him. 'She had been more to him —she might have been more still.' Pshaw! A boaster is always a liar! But then 'he had known her from a child;' that at least was true. And Caryl recoiled with disgust from the thought that possibly the probation to which *he* was being subjected had before been passed through by this vulgar insolent fellow, though he had been found unworthy. Yet, in the young lover's apprehension—

He comes too near, who comes to be refused.

And who could tell how nearly with the familiarity of childhood had blended the deeper feelings of awakening womanhood. The heart that Fernleigh had laid at Margaret's feet had never throbbed with a frivolous

or unholy love. No image save hers had ever been even momentarily impressed on it; and he had clung, as most young men do, to the hope that her maiden fancy was as delicately pure. And lo! in the virgin sanctuary where he knelt to worship, lay the image, though broken and overthrown, of a Willoughby Evans! Was it even overthrown? Might not her hesitation in responding to his addresses arise from a lingering tenderness for one whom prudence rather than inclination had compelled her to discard? Letters—what did the brute say about letters? Could Miss Fielding, by any girlish imprudence, have given him *seeming* warrant for his insolence? Caryl, ever delicate and generous, feared lest by any allusion to such a possibility he might wound her more deeply than he had himself been wounded; but he would not rest under these questionings that

he could not silence, and he finally resolved that he would tell her, not *all* his interview with Evans—the most candid of lovers would be reluctant to confess to his lady that his rival had knocked him down—but so much as would justify him in asking her for an explanation that was no less due to herself than to him. It was midday when he arrived home, having slept the preceding night at Hereford, and Helen, who saw him coming up the avenue, flew joyfully to meet him.

'Good news! Caryl. Queen Mab came home on Wednesday; she was so disappointed that neither of her "boys" met her at the station.'

'She should have written, then,' said Caryl; 'is she well?'

'Quite well, and in good spirits; she is dying to see you again.'

'I will go to her when I have been to the Manor House. I must report myself to Mr. Fielding first; so let me pass, Nell. I want to change my travelling dress before I start.'

That change was soon effected, and Mr. Fernleigh descended, looking, as Helen declared, '*nearly* as handsome as ever,' and ran rather than walked into the Coppice leading to the Manor House (for he chose the shortest way this time).

Mr. Fielding received him with great cordiality, congratulated him on his recovery from his 'accident,' but made no allusion to his conversation with Sir Loys, and presently telling him to go and look for Margaret in the garden, dismissed him with a smile. Miss Fielding was on the terrace, helping the gardener, or being helped by him, to train some straggling chrysanthemums on a wire trellis. The man touched his hat as

young Fernleigh approached, and discreetly withdrew, and Margaret held out her hand, and a faint rose-blush just flitted over her cheek—a blush that would have denied itself if it could, but which the enamoured Caryl thought so lovely, that in gazing on it he quite forgot for a few moments the very existence of Mr. Willoughby Evans. Then Margaret withdrew her hand, and resumed her interrupted task, and her companion stood watching her in silence, trying to find some way of introducing without abruptness the enquiry on which he was bent. But as no way appeared, he plunged *in medias res* by uttering his thoughts aloud.

'If,' he said, in those low soft tones which had so irresistible a fascination for Margaret —'if you should deprive me of the hope of being one day in *your* life what you are in *mine*, I might find some consolation in re-

membering that you had *once* thought me worthy of at least the possibility; but oh, Margaret! not if you took that hope from *me* to bestow it on one who has *proved* himself undeserving of it!'

Miss Fielding looked up in astonishment, and snapped off a bough of pinky silver blooms; while a fat earwig took advantage of her abstraction to crawl up her sleeve.

'What *do* you mean?' she enquired, 'and *who* has proved himself undeserving—of *what*?'

'Perhaps,' rejoined her companion, 'you will deny my right to speak to you on such a theme?'

'But if I grant as a privilege what I might refuse as a claim?' she said graciously.

'Ah, if you will ——,' and he bent down to take her hand, but only touched it, for he

caught a glimpse of the gardener, behind an arbutus bush, and besides, the hand next him had a great ball of string in it.

'Speak frankly, Mr. Fernleigh, you will give me no offence.'

'And no pain? for that would be even worse to me.'

'Pain! No, certainly not.'

'I have heard your name spoken almost disrespectfully, by lips which pleaded as their excuse the privilege of an older *friendship* than mine.'

He paused, and Margaret said quietly, so quietly that he did not detect the suppressed resentment in her voice:

'Willoughby Evans? What has he been saying of me to you?'

The question was embarrassing, for Caryl could not repeat Evans' coarse words. He was silent, and Margaret's eyes flashed.

'What has Willoughby Evans *dared* to say of me to you?'

'Not much; it was what he implied, rather than *said*. Oh, Margaret! *my* Margaret! what can such a man as that ever have been to *you*?'

Clearly Mr. Fernleigh was jealous. Now, most women have a certain pleasure in their lover's jealousy—a feeling that therein lies a power which, carefully wielded, may prolong and confirm their rule. But my heroine, with some grave faults and blemishes, possessed one merit, as great as it is rare—an earnest and courageous truthfulness. This very earnestness, in leading her to face boldly any truth, however painful to herself or others, might under conceivable circumstances make her cold and hard, but would always preserve her from the paltry affectations of coquetry. She met Caryl's eager, passionate

questioning with such a frank simplicity on her forehead, such a fearless loyalty in her clear bright eyes, that the demon of jealousy was quelled before she spoke, and he hated himself for having doubted her.

'All that he has ever been to me,' she answered, 'is a friend admitted to more intimacy than the difference in our social position would otherwise have warranted, because I had known him from a child. Since he has sought to be *more* than that, he has become less, and can never be *anything* to me again.'

'But he speaks of letters?'

'Merely a literary correspondence; upon books that I had studied under his guidance.'

'From the little I have seen of Mr. Evans, I should think he was not peculiarly fitted to direct a young lady's studies.'

'He is more intelligent than you would think, for you have seen him at a disadvantage. Besides I was so young. Those letters! I am ashamed of such silly, girlish effusions; and Evans keeps them to vex and humiliate me. Oh, Mr. Fernleigh, do make him give them up!'

Caryl perceived his advantage, and hastened to seize it.

'To do that, dear, I must have the right of asserting a claim to them.'

Margaret coloured a little, and laughed.

'I don't know,' she said, 'that I ought to refute an impostor like Evans.'

'You grant them, then? Ah, Margaret, my sweet, you will not draw back already?'

Miss Fielding's heart beat so fast, notwithstanding all her efforts at dignified serenity, that the fat earwig, which had

nestled somewhere in her bodice, became apprehensive of an earthquake, and began to walk away.

'Mr. Fernleigh ——'

'Say, "Caryl."'

'Caryl, then,—you promised to give me time.'

'And have I not given you time—ages?'

'Not quite a fortnight.'

'It was an age to me, for it was spent away from *you*.'

'E-e-h! ai! there's something creeping on my neck!—ai! take it off!'

'It's nothing, only a braid of hair,' and Caryl, with his back to the arbutus tree, and the gardener behind it, pressed the stray lock to his lips.

'It's on the other side—ai! ai! it is creeping on my ear! Take it off! Take it off!'

But Mr. Fernleigh did not particularly hurry himself, and having captured the intruder, placed it tenderly on a chrysanthemum bloom.

'Aye, aye,' muttered that horrid gardener as he watched the pantomime with a grin; 'that's your game, is it? It's nateral *you'll* encourage hearwigs!'

Mr. Fielding came towards them, as they were turning towards the house.

'Will you stay and dine, Fernleigh?'

'Thanks, no. I must leave you now. I am going to see a dear friend who has returned to our neighbourhood during my absence.'

'Queen Mab?' said Margaret, eagerly.

'Yes, Queen Mab.'

'Who is she? What is her real name?

'Her real name is Mabel Marston; she is a distant relative of ours, and at my poor

mother's death she so well supplied her place to Collingwood and me, that she is only less dear to us than our true mother would have been.'

'Why does she not live with you, then?'

'You are in for a hurricane of questions, Fernleigh,' said Mr. Fielding laughing. 'I wish you safe through it,' and he walked away, while Caryl answered:

'She quitted us when we returned to England; she preferred an independent home, where she would be at greater leisure to pursue her employment.'

'Her employment?'

'Miss Marston is an authoress. She owes her modest competence chiefly to her own industry and genius. She is known as the admired writer of several works, chiefly historical, of which you have doubtless heard.'

Miss Fielding looked awe-struck.

'Do you mean that she is the Miss Marston who wrote "The Lives of the Poets in the — Century?" and "The Courts of Europe in 16—?"'

'The same.'

'And she is a friend of yours? and I shall see her! I never thought I should see a real living writer of celebrity.'

'Why,' said Caryl, laughing, 'did you think of writers what poets formerly held of cuckoos, that they are heard, but never seen?'

'Not exactly; but I have never met any —and now, there is your brother, and Miss Marston, how insignificant I shall feel among you all?'

'Is this profound humility habitual? Miss Fielding. If so, my penetration is much

in fault that I have never suspected it before.'

'I don't think I have much humility,' answered Margaret, naïvely, 'except as regards literary people; but I *do* look up to them.'

Caryl looked at her with an amused expression, and said:

'I don't think you will look up to Queen Mab.'

'Why do you call her Queen Mab?'

'It is Collingwood's pet name for her. You will understand it when you see her.'

'Is she *nice*? I fancy her like grandmamma, who was very intellectual, you know.'

'But I had not the honour of knowing your grandmamma, so I cannot say if Queen Mab resembles her.'

'She was a very majestic old lady—very

tall, very dark, rather large features, and a very severe expression.'

'I understand the style. Is that your ideal of Miss Marston only, or of all literary and "intellectual" ladies?'

'Of course they cannot all be alike, but that is the type, in my imagination, of female writers. A poet would be quite different.'

'Ah, a poet. What is your idea of a poet's outward seeming? My brother Collingwood, for instance; since the world has assigned to him a name as such?'

'Oh, I know exactly what *he* is like; fair and pale, and thoughtful, with dark dreamy eyes, and silky curls. An etherealised *you*, in short.'

Caryl burst out laughing.

'I had hoped,' he said, 'that you would have found me sufficiently "ethereal" for our prosaic life; but you speak of me with

such contempt that I feel quite abashed at my solidity. Well, you will soon see the originals of both your fancy portraits, and you *may* find it necessary to re-touch them both!'

CHAPTER XV.

QUEEN MAB.

A soul of lofty clearness, like a night
Of stars, wherein the memory of the day
Seems trembling through the meditative air.
P. J. Bailey.

Caryl was still smiling to himself an amused and happy smile, as he walked up the trim garden path, bordered with fuchsias and hydrangeas, of Miss Marston's little cottage in the wood. He knocked lightly at the door, and it was prudently opened a very little way, just wide enough to admit of the protrusion of a head, a gaunt head, *armed*, rather than adorned, with coarse wiry hair, standing

on end, *á la Méduse*, and balancing on the back of it a 'coiffure' that had certainly not been elaborated in the work-room of Madame Elise. When the eyes, one of which derived a rather sinister expression from a crooked black smear over it, rested on Mr. Fernleigh, the door opened a very little wider, and gave to view a lank, scraggy, grimy figure, which had certainly the merit of perfectly 'matching' the head; and which were the united possessions of Miss Marston's old servant Georgina, or as the young men at the Park familiarly styled her, 'the Gorgon.' 'The Gorgon' was in a bad humour to-day, because Caryl's visit had compelled her to come to the door before she had 'cleaned herself,' and she did not receive him with her usual affability. To his enquiry. 'Was Miss Marston within?' she replied sharply:

'O' course she's in, Mr. Fernleigh; what should ail her to go out, when she only came home yesterday?'

'Don't be so cross, Georgie,' smiled the young man, 'or I shall be afraid to pass you when you will let me.'

The privileged handmaiden disregarded the hint.

'You'd be cross too, if anything could make you, if you'd toiled as I've done this last month to put the rooms tidy for missis, and then see the barrow-loads of old rubbishing papers and all the *mullock* she's brought home with her.'

'Let me in, Georgie; I at least have brought no *mullock* with me. Is your mistress in the parlour?'

'Yes, she is,' answered the Gorgon, making way for Caryl to squeeze past her into a tiny but beautifully kept vestibule.

'She's there, making a 'orrid mess, as usual.'

The visitor tapped at the parlour door, but receiving no answer, entered without further ceremony.

It was an odd incongruous sort of room for such a cottage—very narrow, very low, and very long in proportion to its height and width, having in fact absorbed into itself, in the course of its construction, a succession of small rooms at one end that had served formerly as dairy, larder, &c., and one of which was still indicated by a deep unlighted recess, without a door, fitted up from top to bottom with well-filled book-shelves. The apartment had one wide window, opening nearly to the ground, upon the little garden, fenced off from the wood. The furniture, rich and tasteful, bespoke a womanly appreciation of pretty things, but

its ornaments were only three. One was a crystal vase upon the table, containing no flowers at all. The second was a picture over the chimney-piece, closely veiled by a shutter, such as may be seen on some of the old paintings in foreign cathedrals, on which was represented an English frigate riding at anchor in a quiet harbour. A mere sketch, possessing no striking merit. On the painting concealed behind this shutter no eyes were permitted to rest. Whether Miss Marston herself ever gazed upon it in solitude is unknown. She never showed it to any one, even to the family at the Park; but there was a belief current among them that Sir Loys had seen it, as it had belonged years ago to his deceased wife, who had presented it to Miss Marston, and that he could have described it as the portrait of a man past his first youth, but still in the prime of

life. A man in the uniform of a naval officer, with nothing remarkable in his face except an expression of energy and determination. No one would ever see that picture again: for at Miss Marston's death it would be taken down by loving hands, and burnt in reverent silence. The third ornament was a small marble statue of Silence, which Collingwood had brought from Italy, and presented to his godmother with the saucy remark, that 'silence' was at once the *rarest* and most *desirable* ornament that could be found in a lady's chamber. So incongruous a decoration for a cottage parlour had excited much raillery among Miss Marston's 'habitués.' But she held to it firmly, notwithstanding Sir Loys' hint that it would look much better in the large drawing-room at the Park. She even resisted 'the Gorgon's' determined hostility to 'the great lumbering

image, with nothing but her shimmy on,' which she declared, gave her 'quite a turn, like;' but for which her familiarity bred a contempt which she expressed by using it as a peg on which to hang her mistress' cloak or bonnet when she came in from her walks; or sometimes her own apron, or duster; and on one occasion she left suspended from the passive hand, with its 'symbol rose,' a dirty old hearth-brush, of which the antiquity was rather remote than classical. All the walls of the room were lined with book-shelves fully furnished, and, as if these were not enough, a promiscuous heap of books and MSS., the 'mullock' of Georgie, lay piled in one corner of the room. Near the books was a cushion luxuriously stuffed, and richly embroidered by the skilful needle of Aunt Flo, upon which reclined a beautiful Persian cat; and seated

on the floor beside the cat and among the books was the very smallest lady it is possible to imagine, if we except Minnie Warren and her sisterhood. Her back was to the door as Caryl entered, and she did not turn round, but held up a tiny hand, white and transparent as a butterfly's wing, to enjoin silence, as she continued to bend over the volume she was reading. Caryl obeyed the gesture, and remained standing at the door gazing upon her with such a tender admiring smile as even Margaret might have envied. Her dress, of some soft grey material, was gathered round her waist under a wide girdle, and fastened high up round her throat with a little lace frill; and both throat and waist, in their slender and rounded contours, might have suggested the figure of a young girl, but that beneath the rich black lace that fell over her bended head

were seen braids and coils of hair, fine as silk and white as silver. Even so, the hair was still so luxuriant that illness or sorrow might have prematurely blanched it; but when she dropped her book and turned towards the visitor, the illusion vanished, for from her face, sweet and fair as it yet was, the bloom of youth had long faded.

On perceiving who was her visitor she uttered a joyful cry, and, springing to her feet with a vivacity that would have been *bizarre* in most ladies on the shady side of fifty, but which was natural and graceful in *her*, she threw herself into Caryl's ready arms.

'Car'l, my dearest! I verily thought it was Georgie!'

'And you never heard me knock? you never heard me talking to Georgie at the door?—but,' glancing at Collingwood's poem,

which she had let fall, 'I see what engrossed you so deeply; it's the old story; no hearing for *me* when *that* rival seeks an audience.'

'Hear him!' cried Mabel, with a musical laugh; 'why, with what face dare *you* pretend jealousy?—*you* who have given *me* a far more fatal rival than ever Colin was to *you*? When have you ever before suffered me to return from an absence without being the first to meet and welcome me?'

'You unconscionable little creature, I only returned home myself this morning!'

'And have you come to me straight from home?—ah, see how guilty you look. But I can be magnanimous and forgive you; come to the light and let me look at you.'

She threw herself into a low chair by the window; and Caryl in compliance, it would seem, with an established formula, knelt at

her feet, while she looked gravely and fixedly into his face.

Mabel Marston's eyes were the reverse of the Lady Geraldine's, whose 'eyes alone smiled constantly;' for although when animated, a world of innocent mirthfulness would dance in the arch smiling dimples of mouth and chin, those dark blue eyes remained ever thoughtful and serious, as if over the soul that looked forth from their clear depths there had swept, long ago, some sorrow that had left a memory there, not saddening, but solemnising, them for ever.

'Car'l, what's that yellow *smudge* on your cheek? Have you been quarrelling with the lilies?'

'Nothing so soft as lilies,' said Caryl, laughing; 'never mind that just now; what do you think of my looks, Mabel?'

'You look—you look—as the vineyards look when the winter is past and the rains are over and gone. Oh, Car'l, my dearest! how I will love and bless her if she will *always* make a sunshine for you like *this*.'

Certainly Mr. Fernleigh *did* look very happy and bright just then; but Mabel always acted as a reflector for every ray of light that ever fell upon him; she did not know that the glow of her eager sympathy could lend a brighter illumination even to 'love's young dream.' But he did not pursue the subject she had opened to him.

'How is Robert Browning?' he asked, going up to the sleeping cat. 'Has Georgie taken proper care of him?'

'Very good care; does he not look well?'

'Quite well; he is a cat of a philosophical temperament, like his namesake, and does not pine over inevitable evils—such as

your absence for instance. I wish I could have imitated his resignation!'

'As if you had so much as missed me! Look at that vase; not a single blossom in it! Caryl, is Miss Fielding beautiful? There, you need not say anything—such a silly question to ask a lover; of course there's only one answer to be expected.'

'Is there not? I cannot give you any; I do not know if she is beautiful or not.'

'Just like your dreaminess; do you know what her grandmother's name was?'

'Yes,' said Caryl, laughing; 'why do you ask?'

'Because Helen tells me that she was brought up by that relative until her mother's death, two years back; and I could guess what she is like if I knew who brought her up.'

'She is the granddaughter of a Lady Tolmaine, of Enfield.'

'Ah, I know; I have met that lady in years past. And so you are following the family fashion of marrying heiresses?'

'*I* shall not marry an heiress.'

'No? Yet it is said that Miss Fielding will be the heiress of the millionaire merchant, Mr. Morton of Fenchurch Street!'

'Will she?' answered Caryl, carelessly; 'I have little faith in millionaires, and still less in their testamentary arrangements. Miss Fielding has, I believe, a moderate fortune, settled on her by her grandmother; if she has more, I know nothing of it, and do not particularly care.'

'I see; Sir Loys has been afraid to tell you, lest your pride should take alarm at being thought a fortune-hunter.'

'Nay,' answered Caryl, smiling; 'Mr.

Fielding claims direct descent from our ancestors, so that if his daughter re-entered the family with the fabulous wealth you speak of (*fabulous*, I believe it is), she would only be enriching the estates of her own forefathers, and laying *us* under no obligation.'

'Well, if *you* don't marry an heiress, Collingwood must; for Sir Loys is perfectly dismayed at his extravagance.'

'My brother is so thoughtless, I am afraid some of the Fernleigh tenants will suffer, to atone for his reckless expenditure.'

'Exactly; while Colin drains the exchequer *you* cannot drain the lands! Don't look so solemn, child; it will all be right when Colin marries Helen.'

'He does not care for Helen, and she is too innocent and good to be thrown away on a man who is indifferent to her.'

'He is not indifferent to her, but he will never fling his whole soul at a woman's feet as you do. His wife must worship *him*, and Helen is well disposed to that rational form of idolatry.'

Caryl shook his head.

'I know what you mean; you doubt Colin's capacity for a *pure* attachment; but it is precisely to that I look as the best means of reclaiming him from aimless dissipation.'

'If Helen were very beautiful,' said Caryl doubtfully.

'Nonsense; Colin can always discern beauty in what belongs exclusively to himself. He can do without beauty besides, but he cannot do without the means of self-indulgence.'

'You treat your idol with scant ceremony, Mabel; you are a regular little matchmaker.

Are *all* women given to that diversion, I wonder?'

'How should I know? I never saw her.'

Caryl blushed like a girl.

'I said *all* women, Mab.'

'I heard you; but do you think I do not know that when a young man in love talks of *all* women, he means only the one illustrious she? Go away, and bring her here to-morrow.'

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